For Him I Sing

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For Him I Sing

by peppermintquartz

Summary

They know the difference between mercy and justice.
Mercy is what the law provides.
Justice is what they serve.

In which Will and Matthew discover just how dark they can become for the ones they love.

Notes

For Him I Sing
Walt Whitman
For him I sing,
I raise the present on the past,
(As some perennial tree out of its roots, the present on the past,)
With time and space I him dilate and fuse the immortal laws,
To make himself by them the law unto himself.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The backyard barbecue has just started when Matthew and Esther Brown arrive at four o'clock. Will opens the back gate for them and ushers them to the food.

"Happy 21st birthday, Will," says Matthew, handing over a small present. "Sorry for the crappy gift."

"It's not crappy if it's from you, Matthew. Esther, sweetie, aren't you gonna give me a birthday hug?" asks Will, hunkering down so he's eye level with Esther.

The girl laughs and wraps her arms around her brother's best friend. "Happy birthday, Will!"

"Thank you, Esther. Let's go say hi to Hannibal, and then you can play with Winston and Buster, all right?" He winks at Matthew. They both know Dr Lecter spoils the girl, but neither young men are inclined to dissuade the doctor. Esther can do with some spoiling.

Matthew smiles widely as his eleven-year-old sister skips off with Will Graham. He sees a few familiar faces and says hello to them. The beautiful Dr Alana Bloom and her FBI agent girlfriend, Beverly Katz, wave at him as they head into the house via the patio door. They're probably here as adult conversation partners for Dr Lecter. Two of Will's colleagues and also Mr Curtis, his boss from the piano restoration company, have come. The incredibly wealthy but low-key and easygoing Mikolaj, whom Matthew's bonded with over British indie films and a common love of thrash metal, both of which Will has failed to learn to appreciate despite the two older youths' attempts to educate him in.

Mikolaj grins. "Hey Matt."

"Hi," says Matthew, taking a seat beside him on a long bench after grabbing a beer. He'll stop at one, though. No way is he going to drive drunk when Esther's with him. "When are you returning to Prague?"

"Next Thursday." Mikolaj sighs. "How's nursing school? Any cute babes?"

"Why, you wanna break more hearts before you leave?" Matthew hardly stutters now, but the lisp turns up frequently, except when he's really focused. Mikolaj and Will don't call attention to it, so Matthew tries not to mind it either. "Two or three babes, but you know nurses. They've got their hearts set on doctors."

"Will ain't a nurse and he snagged himself a doctor," Mikolaj jokes. "Never thought Will Graham would actually invite so many into his home. I can still remember the skinny kid that couldn't look me in the eyes when we first met."

Matthew chuckles. He's heard of their first encounter, when Will was practicing on a piano - the same one that now sits in Will's and Dr Lecter's study - and Mikolaj unintentionally interrupted him. "Times have changed. People too."

"It's a good change," says Mikolaj.

The two young men both know that it is Dr Lecter that guided Will's transformation. A forty-one-year-old bachelor psychiatrist dating a seventeen-year-old high school dropout had been a minor scandal, but it was obvious to those who met them that they were truly in love. According to Mikolaj, Will has transformed from shy wallflower to beau of the ball, and was a society darling. Apparently Will's wit and elegance have garnered him fans within high society, and the fact that Will shuns the sort of shenanigans put on by those reality-TV celeb wannabes has won himself the approval of Dr Lecter's peers.

When Matthew first met Will in the bookstore where the former worked part-time, the younger man seemed like a teenage punk kid putting on a show of bravado. Now Will is very much an assured young man who knows how he fits with the world. Matthew envies him that certainty.

He also envies Will his boyfriend Dr Lecter, though he's made very sure he never shows it. The older man is refined, controlled, elegant; everything Matthew isn't. There's a kind of understanding between him and Dr Lecter too, in that he knows that the good doctor recognizes that Matthew's mind isn't put together quite right. But that's okay, because Matthew knows that Dr Lecter loves Will, and Will thinks of Matthew as his best friend in the world, and Dr Lecter dotes on Esther. He gave Esther at least ten different presents last Christmas, which stunned Matthew and shocked their mother, but Esther loved every single gift.

Mikolaj elbows him curiously. "Penny."

"Nothing. Just wondering how long Esther's gonna be begging us for a dog this time when we get home."

"You could get her one," says Mikolaj blithely. "A terrier or something."

"She's not quite ready to take care of a dog, Miko, she can barely take care of herself some days." Matthew knows that Mikolaj doesn't mean to forget that Esther is slightly autistic. The blond young man is thoughtless in the manner of genuinely carefree people; he means no ill. "We'll have one when she's older, or after I graduate from nursing sch-ool."

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Beverly goes out to the grill to grab a burger and returns to see Alana and Hannibal laughing at some joke that Beverly just missed.

"Doc, I'll get jealous if you keep seducing my girlfriend," she says with a crooked grin, and snakes an arm around Alana. She plants a wet one on Alana's cheek and adds, "So. Twenty-one years old. What lavish gifts did you get him this time?"

Hannibal looks pained. "He told me he wants me to get absolutely nothing. I had to strong-arm him into this gathering."

"To be fair, you did get him a second dog at Christmas," says Alana with a cheeky grin. "He probably thinks you're been put through enough."

"How did he get you to agree to two dogs anyway?" Beverly asks.

Before Hannibal can answer, Alana chirps up, "Puppy eyes and I *think* there's a kinky favor in there somewhere. I haven't managed to wheedle it out of him yet. Help me?"

Taking in the gleam of mischief in both women's eyes, Hannibal makes a quick escape to the patio door with the potatoes. Beverly laughs and steals Alana's beer for a sip.

"He is *so* whipped," Beverly comments. Then she exhales. "If it weren't for Will being so young, I'd say they're a model couple."

Alana makes a noise of agreement. She retrieves her beer and says, "I like them both, but sometimes seeing them together just feels..."

"Like there's something wrong in your belly?"

"Like I drank something wrong and it sours in my mouth," says Alana quietly. She sighs and pulls her hair back into a ponytail. "But Hannibal looks so happy, and sometimes I think he looks younger. Will's good for him. I just wish..."

Beverly hugs Alana firmly and kisses her on her temple. "Hey. Remember their ridiculous sparkly eye-sex at the BAU party? We both know that Hannibal practically worships Will. Maybe they really are meant for each other, except Will was born twenty years too late."

"Maybe. I just sometimes think of what could have been, y'know?" Alana says. "Then again, Hannibal's loss has been your incredible gain."

"Uh-huh," says Beverly brightly and proudly. "I really should thank Will more often. Are you sure you don't wanna know what I got him?"

"I'm definitely certain I do not want to know." Alana grins. "Plausible deniability."

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"Dr Lecter, your harpsichord is absolutely beautiful," says Mr Joshua Curtis, Will's boss. "Have you had it long?"

"It was my uncle's," says Hannibal with a smile. "Thank you for the compliment."

Mr Curtis sips his wine and nods. "Harpsichords are underrated, alas. You need more sensitivity with them than pianos, in my opinion."

"It does require greater subtlety in playing."

"Will mentioned you were a surgeon," says Mr Curtis. "Delicacy of touch shouldn't be an issue with you then."

Hannibal smiles. He likes Will's boss. Will once recorded him playing Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 3, and Hannibal was impressed by the depth of emotion the man put into the piece. The man had been fazed in the beginning by Will's and Hannibal's unconventional relationship, but once he took Will under his wing he's been nothing but supportive.

"You're here to work and to learn," he once told Will after the young man was picked on by some customers. Mr Curtis had expelled the customers from the shop and refused to do business with them. "I don't care whom you date, as long as you do your work properly and learn as much as you can. And I think you're smart enough to learn everything I can teach you." Will had been very touched. It also earned Mr Curtis a permanent place on Hannibal's Christmas list. Too bad Will never got the name card from the rude customers.

The two men debate the respective merits of Bach and Scarlatti, and Hannibal is genuinely sorry to end the conversation when he checks his watch.

"Time for cake," he says, retreating into the house. The cake is also a hard-won argument (actually, it was fairly easy once Hannibal had Will in the bathtub with him). He turns and almost collides with Esther, who has come up behind him with the dogs. Winston woofs softly and Buster wags his tail; they look satisfied that they have managed to surprise their owner.

Esther is grinning. "They kept very quiet, Hannibal."

"They did," says Hannibal with a smile. "Esther, you know the rules. The dogs aren't allowed in the kitchen. What should you do now?"

"Sorry, Hannibal." The girl looks slightly abashed. "I'll take them outside."

"Yes. Can you do that for me? And then tell Will it's time for cake."

"Okay!" Esther leads the dogs out.

Hannibal can't help the softness in his gaze as he regards the little girl. There is a devotion in Esther's eyes when she looks at her brother Matthew that brings to mind Hannibal's late baby sister, Mischa. Will has teased him often about him doting too much on Esther, but Hannibal can't stop wanting to make her smile. In her, he finds a little solace for the emptiness within that not even his beloved can fill.

There is a delighted chorus of amazement when Hannibal comes out with the elaborate red velvet cake, but Will just buries his face in his forearms at the table. He's flanked by Mikolaj and his colleague Johnny, both of whom are keeping him from bolting. When Will eventually looks up, he is bashful and exasperated at the same time.

"You're really going to do the song and everything," he grumbles. "Fine. Let's get it over with. Then we can have cake."

Only Hannibal can see past that embarrassed and grumpy facade to the genuine gratitude beneath. Will's last birthday celebration, more than a decade ago, had ended in tears, which was why the young man was resistant to the notion of a party at first. They do sing the song, and there are candles, and there are birthday wishes. Johnny and Danielle tease Will about being of drinking age - Hannibal smiles to himself; he's looking forward to educating Will in wine appreciation - and that they can go to pubs together now.

When Esther gets cream cheese frosting smeared over her face, it becomes a shrieking frosting attack party among the young people. Hannibal and the other adults hide themselves in the kitchen with wine and what Beverly has salvaged of the red velvet cake.

"You'd think they're all eight years old," Mr Curtis comments with an indulgent smile. His three youngest employees, Will included, are laughing wildly with cream cheese frosting over their faces and in their hair. "I'm glad to see them having fun. I know I drive them rather hard at work."

"Will never complains," says Hannibal.

"He picks up things fast enough that I do not need to push him," says Mr Curtis. Then he sighs. "Thank you, Dr Lecter. I have to go. The missus is expecting me."

As though that is the signal, Will and his small group of friends pile back into the house to clean up. Once they have washed away the frosting, they devour the remains of the cake, and then bid Will farewell.

Hannibal likes that cheerful and open expression on his young lover's face. It warms his heart that Will is more connected to the world now, and that if, by some stroke of bad luck, Hannibal is caught, Will will not be left alone to fend for himself.

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"We're not going to see Will open presents?" Esther asks when Matthew leads her out the main door.

Will hugs her. "Sorry, Esther, I don't like doing that in front of people. Thank you for being here to celebrate my birthday."

"You're welcome," says Esther. "You are visiting with Winston and Buster right? I can walk them with you on Saturday, right?"

"Yes, sweetie. I'll come over at two." Will ruffles her hair and she then goes pattering to Hannibal, her favorite adult. When Will straightens, he hugs Matthew. "Thanks, Matt. I appreciate your coming today. I know you're busy with school and the hospital."

Matthew smiles crookedly. "What are friends for? And I, uh, I wanted to... I wonder if you could call me tomorrow. Evening. I've something to discuss w-ith you."

"We could talk now-"

"Not today. Not with... Not with Esther here." The young man glances at his sister, who is talking animatedly to Hannibal about what she saw last night with the telescope he gave her as a Christmas gift.

Will sees the tension there and murmurs, "Is it something to do with Esther?"

"We'll talk tomorrow," says Matthew quietly. His gaze lands on Hannibal and then his cheeks pink very slightly.

It's not unnoticed by Will.

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"Bye, doc," says Beverly. She adds in a conspiratorial whisper, "Open my present to Will when you're in the bedroom."

She bounds away to say goodbye to Will. For all that she's fifteen years older than Will Graham, the two frequently meet up for lunch or coffee dates. Beverly claims it's because Will's workplace is close to Quantico and he's better mealtime company than the other agents. Hannibal has a feeling it's for them to compare notes on himself and Alana.

Perplexed and slightly concerned, Hannibal turns to Alana for a hint. Alana just shrugs. "I don't know what she got him."

"I'm surprised," says Hannibal. "I thought she'd have told you."

"I *intentionally* did not wish to find out," Alana amended. She embraces Hannibal. "But I'd take her suggestion into consideration."

"Ah. I understand." He glances at his lover giggling with Beverly. "Do you ever worry about what schemes those two might come up with?"

Alana nods sagely. "Good thing they have us."

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Hannibal stands with Will as Matthew and Esther hop into their beat-up red Honda. The doctor sees the strange look Matthew casts at Will just before they drive off, and thinks that it's good that he trusts Will completely.

"I think Matthew has a crush on you," Will says after they have returned to the house to clean up the backyard.

Hannibal laughs. "No, mon amour, he is infatuated with *you*. Though I'm surprised you haven't noticed."

"Oh, no no no, I've seen how he looks at you, Hannibal. Like he's in awe and completely smitten at the same time." Will grins unabashedly. "He's got good taste, I must say."

"You," says Hannibal, "can't possibly be this oblivious to the way he regards you. I would use that expression as a definition for the word 'smitten'."

They stare at each other, as though trying to determine which is the liar.

Will breaks the tableau first. "Well, maybe he has feelings for us both."

"Unfortunately I have no intention of sharing," says Hannibal, coming closer to wrap his arms around Will's middle. "You're mine."

"I'm yours," Will agrees happily. "And we still have to clean up. No, Buster, leave that alone."

The young man shoos the smaller mongrel from an empty beer bottle and herds his two dogs into their shelter. Hannibal thinks he should be worried that all this is too good to be true, but right now he just basks in the perfection that is life with Will Graham.

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Matthew is pleasantly surprised when he sees Will waiting outside the school building. "Hey. I thought you were gonna call."

"Thought I'd drive you home after a coffee." Will plays with the car keys. His gaze is anything but playful though.

"Hey Matthew, your boyfriend?" someone calls out before Matthew can answer. "Too cute for you!"

"Fuck off, Rashyd," Matthew replies over his shoulder. "Sorry Will. Buncha louts."

Will shrugs. "No biggie. Johnny's the same. So, coffee?"

Matthew stretches and winces as a kink works out from his shoulder. "There's a decent cafe at the mall."

Will makes a face. He still doesn't like crowds much. Matthew climbs into Will's vehicle - a black Toyota Camry - and they head off. Will sees the strain around Matthew's eyes and mouth, as though the other young man hasn't been sleeping well. They don't talk until they find a small table in the cafe.

The smell of coffee wraps around them like a veil. Matthew wraps his hands around his cup like he really needed the warmth; his jaw clenches.

"Matthew," says Will softly, "you wanna tell me what's wrong?"

"It's hard to put word to it," Matthew mutters. He risks looking at Will directly - sometimes, when Will makes eye contact, it's as though the younger guy can read everything in a person's

mind. He wishes that was the case, because then he doesn't have to phrase his dark suspicions.

Unfortunately Will isn't a telepath.

Matthew takes a too-large sip of the espresso he has ordered for himself. His hands are shaking and he links his hands together firmly. When Will reaches over to cover his hands with one of his own, Matthew has to suppress his flinch of surprise.

"It's about Esther," Matthew whispers.

Will remains quiet, but he angles his body to listen.

"She's... She's acting odd at home. I mean, our normal isn't other people's normal, b-ut she's..." Matthew runs a hand through his hair. "Some signs are... worrisome. She threw out all her dolls. Even her first one, the one I got her."

Will frowns, but remains silent. His hand does not leave Matthew's.

Matthew purses his lips. "She said they were wrong, because they *keep looking*. What kind of thing is that to say?"

"Did you ask her?"

"I did," says Matthew. "She refuses to tell. She tells me everything,Will, ever since we were kids. And she's wetting her bed again, and mom screamed at her about it the other night. I-I can understand why mom got so frustrated; Esther hasn't wet her bed since she was seven. yesterday was the first time in a long time she was happy. I just- I know something's wrong, but I-I-I don't know what it is."

Will squeezes Matthew's hands. He doesn't usually initiate contact but Matthew is grateful for it, grateful for the steadiness in his friend's grip, like a rock amid a storm. "Have you told your mother?"

"She thinks I'm being paranoid." Matthew pulls one hand from Will's hold and rubs his face. "But this is the same woman who asked me to explain menstruation cycles to my sister. I don't think she's a good gauge of w-what's happening in Esther's life, or Esther."

"Anything else that Esther's done that raises an alarm?" Will asks.

Matthew chews on the inside of his cheeks. "She's not acting up in school or anything. Mrs Jenkins still looks after Esther in the afternoon until I can pick her up. I don't- I don't know, Will. Am I paranoid? Reading t-too much into something?"

Will looks thoughtful. "I don't know. She loves her dolls, and to throw them all out seems kinda extreme. Is it okay if I tell Hannibal about this and ask him his views? I mean, he's not an expert in child psychology, but it's still better than what I know. Anyway, when I see her on Saturday, I can try to ask her. Maybe she's embarrassed to ask you."

"She's not embarrassed about asking me anything, Will," says Matthew with a small grin. "I mean, this is the same sister who asked me very loudly the difference between ribbed condoms and flavored ones and which I prefer."

"There really aren't many boundaries between you and Esther, are there?" Will smiles, patting his friend's hands, and then folding his arms. His expression softens slightly. "I'll try to find out. She's like my sister too."

The mood is quite heavy. Matthew wonders what to say to lighten it a little, but Will surprises him with a question.

"Matthew, do you have a crush on Hannibal?"

"The nursing student chokes and coughs up his coffee. "Wh-what?"

Will tilts his head mischievously. "We have a bet going on. I think you have a crush on him, and he thinks you have a crush on, uh... on me. So I'm kinda curious."

"Will, I-I-I don't, um. I-I-I-I-I don't really think of either of y-ou in that way. I do like you both but, not infatuation or-or-or, um." Matthew covers his mouth. He needs to regain his composure before he speaks; his stutter is catching up to his tongue.

Not drawing attention to the stammer, Will grimaces wryly. "Guess we've both lost the bet then."

"Do I w-ant to know what the gambit was?"

The cheeky smirk on the younger guy's face is enough to explain the nature of the bet. They chat about other stuff then, about Matthew's school work and internship, about Will's work now that he's taking on some projects of his own without need of supervision.

They don't talk about Esther, not until Will has stopped outside Matthew's house and the taller young man is about to alight.

"He'll know what to do, Mattie," Will says. "I'll call you tomorrow."

The affectionate use of the nickname makes Matthew feel warm. He has no boundaries with Esther, and he has very few limits between him and Will and Dr Lecter too. There will come a time when Matthew will need to erect some fences, maybe after he finds someone of his own to love the way Will and Dr Lecter love each other, but till then, he will bask in the reflected glow from his best friend's relationship.

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That evening, Will works through Čiurlionis' piano works, but his mind keeps circling the conversation with Matthew. Hannibal is in the kitchen but the door to the study is open, so Will's playing filters through the house, as does the enticing scents from whatever culinary miracle Hannibal has created. The young man has been unsettled since Matthew has confided in him.

Some things you just know, he reasons. And he has been a victim for long enough in his life to know when someone is really reaching out for help.

He knows that if he lays out the facts to Hannibal, the doctor is likely to hunt down whomever is hurting his precious Esther and flay him. It will be a glorious spectacle. Hannibal has killed in the past four years, low-key and hidden murders expertly hidden as everyday violence, and Will has been there for almost every single one. He selects the pig, he watches the slaughter (and plays watch-out during the kills), he partakes of the meat. Hannibal likes to tease that Will is his handler, but the fact is that Will won't let Hannibal bear the crime completely. While Will does not personally wish to kill, he wants to be just as guilty as Hannibal in all these crimes. Were they ever caught, there is no way Hannibal can claim that he acted alone. Through thick and thin and all that.

The thing is, if it is a child molester - and Will is aware that too many autistic children are ideal victims for this sort of crime, simply because they can't convey their distress or their experiences the way other children their age can - then Hannibal must *not* kill him or her.

Death would be a mercy for the offender.

Will switches over to Duke Ellington's to scatter the storm clouds in his head. The other instruments play on in his imagination, and he's nodding to the bass and drums as his fingers saunter over the keys. He's so engrossed he doesn't notice that Hannibal is watching from the door, a hint of a smile on his sensual lips and lighting up his eyes. The doctor waits until the final chord is played before he speaks.

"Dinner?"

"Starving."

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As they get ready for bed, Hannibal listens to Will relate Matthew's suspicions. The flare of protectiveness inside Hannibal isn't unexpected. For a serial-killing cannibal, he has a remarkably robust moral code, and he cares for Esther Brown.

"What should Matthew do?" Will asks, fingers splayed over Hannibal's belly.

"I'd recommend he take Esther in for a thorough medical exam," says Hannibal.

"We'll let the law handle it if there are any signs of abuse," says Will. "Child molesters and rapists don't survive long in prison, and there's no way I'd allow someone who hurt Esther the mercy of death."

Hannibal hums in agreement. Sometimes the perpetrators' crimes against children are not revealed to the prison populace, but Hannibal knows he will find a means to let the inmates 'discover' the truth should there be a need to. Furthermore, he is a fan of revenge served ice cold. Let the law deal with them, and if they do get out after a short term in prison, then Will and Hannibal will deal out justice.

He kisses Will's brow. "You can look out for other signs when you go over on Saturday. Increased avoidance or aggression are both signals. You mentioned bed-wetting, and that's a strong signal. Is there anything new in her life?"

"I don't know. I'll find out."

"Esther is fairly talkative for a girl with autism," says Hannibal thoughtfully. "Deviation from the norm would be silence or excessive chatter. You could also listen to the content of her conversation."

It's odd, thinking of himself as a sort of vigilante. The urge to kill has receded to manageable levels; without the excuse of keeping his cold storage filled, Hannibal finds it less satisfying to slaughter the pigs that cross his path. Once or twice a season, Will digs up someone who deserves death, and they make it a special date. Hannibal performs, Will admires, and after that the doctor usually extracts something to create a meal for himself. Once Hannibal describes the tableau for Will, they have no need to execute Hannibal's visions, so that level of risk is removed. Hannibal has little desire to display his work for an unappreciative audience. Will, with his imagination and sensitivity, is the perfect patron.

As far as he and Will are concerned, the Ripper has retired - for the past four years, there have been no new murders attributed to the Ripper - but a slew of other murdering psychopaths have tried to claim the throne. Will is both exasperated and disgusted at the imitators. He says it's akin to comparing a kindergartner's finger painting to Van Gogh. Hannibal tries not to be too flattered.

For the most part, Hannibal just watches with mild amusement. He dispatched of two through the FBI, giving them enough cues to capture Jason Hannock, who was styled the Hook Bleeder for his weapon and preferred method of execution, and Eve Jacobsen, who removed the brains of a number of neo-Nazis and some prominent politicians. Hannibal was truly sad to profile the latter, but she had to go after she lobotomized the chief of police.

He is distracted when Will props himself up on an elbow. "We both lost our bets, by the way."

"Which bet?"

"Matthew has no crush on either of us."

Hannibal pretends to be stricken. "Mon amour, you have lost your charm."

"Have I?" Will growls, and climbs on top of his lover. "Should I demonstrate my *charm* again, Dr Lecter?"

"Mm. My formal title is *Count* Lecter," Hannibal says.

"*Count Lecter*," Will purrs, and scratches his fingers down the older man's broad, furred chest. "Shall we see how charming I can be?"

Chapter End Notes

Mikalojus Čiurlionis - Piano Works He's a Lithuanian painter, composer and writer. I assume Hannibal has some of his works within his collection.
Duke Ellington's So

Sexual Abuse of Children with Autism is something to read up on, particularly the fact the children and adults on that side of the spectrum tend to be targeted because their behaviors are frequently misinterpreted as signs of their autism. It's not a lengthy article but it does give quite a lot of food for thought.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With her autism, Esther needs routine, so Matthew has set one up for her.

She wakes at eight in the morning and leaves for school by eight-thirty. She reaches Mrs Jenkins' at one in the afternoon, and Matthew picks her up at five on his way home. She takes her shower at six, they have dinner at six-thirty, and she then does her homework under Matthew's watchful eye. She goes to bed at nine-thirty.

Sometimes, Matthew wonders what his mom is good for. Other than paying the school fees and bills, she hardly interacts with her children. It had been Matthew's father who pushed for Matthew to get speech therapy, and when Esther was diagnosed with mild autism the man had bailed, so Matthew feels nothing but contempt for his father. Their mom may have stayed, but she hardly cares. In so many ways, Esther is more like his daughter than his sister. He's ten years her senior, and he has loved her from the moment he first saw her in her little bassinet. When Esther acts up, it's Matthew who bears the brunt of her tantrums and calms her down; when Esther is overwhelmed by conflicting messages and too much input, it's Matthew who translates the world for his baby sister.

Now that she's frightened, he wishes so much to put the world right for her again.

When I graduate and get a steady job, I'll get Esther out of here, he thinks. It's not an unattainable goal. But he recognizes the difficulties inherent in such an arrangement - he'll have to be her caretaker, and his own life may be put on indefinite hold, not to say of the expenses that will be incurred - but Matthew wants to believe he can do this.

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Friday is one of Matthew's longest days, and he is exhausted. Still, he makes sure Esther is tucked in properly before he returns to his own room next door. She hasn't wet the bed for the past four nights and he's hopeful that it was only a passing phase, not a regression. The notes he's reading are not making sense, but he tries his best to comprehend his own scribbles.

It's practically midnight and he's about to turn in when he hears the screaming from the bedroom next door. He barges in and sweeps the shrieking Esther up in his arms. She is damp; the room smells of urine.

"It's okay, sweetheart, Mattie's got you, Mattie's here," he soothes. There will come a day she will be too heavy to carry. Even now he can't hold her for too long, and he carefully kneels down so she's standing but with her arms wrapped tightly about his neck and shoulders. Her cries die down quickly, for which Matthew is thankful.

His mother comes to the door. "What's she want now?"

Matthew almost snaps at her, but restrains himself. "Esther, sweetheart, look at me please."

His sister sniffs and then obeys.

"Please tell me what happened, sweetheart," says Matthew quietly.

"Oh for God's sake, did you wet the bed *again?*" their mother demands as she goes to inspect the bed. "I thought we were over this."

Esther makes a distressed noise and Matthew hugs her close. "Mom, could you help Esther change? I'll change the sheets. She can sleep in my bed tonight, and I'll take the couch."

"No no no no..." Esther protests, her fingers clinging to Matthew. "Don't wanna sleep Mattie I don't wanna sleep-"

"Hush sweetheart, change first, we'll talk in a moment okay? Let Mom help you change."

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Esther doesn't want Matthew to leave her alone, so he digs out an old sleeping bag and a bunch of cushions from the couch to sleep on the floor beside her. This gets her to calm down, and he asks her to go through the stars in the constellations she has seen through her telescope to further relax.

When she is about to doze off, he asks quietly, "I'm worried about you, sweetheart. Can't you tell me what's scaring you?"

"No," she says. "Telling is wrong. If I tell, you'll die."

"Is that why you threw away the dolls? Because they'll tell?"

"Because they looked. Looking is bad," Esther murmurs gravely.

Matthew strokes her silky hair until she is completely asleep, and then he sends Will a text with what she said, knowing that his friend will show Dr Lecter. He then tries to sleep. In his dreams, he and Esther are on a small island, and the waters are rising. In the water is an amorphous creature that only Esther can see; Matthew has nothing with him other than a sword.

You will have to dive in to kill it, says Esther-of-his-dream. She is suddenly four years old again, with flowers in her hair, and a pretty pink dress. *It won't come out if you're here. But you have to go into the water if you want to kill it.*

I can't swim, Matthew tells Esther. When he wakes he'll think this is silly. He can swim, very well in fact.

Four-year-old Esther grins and hands him a flower. It turns into a sword in his hand.

Go into the water, Mattie, says Esther, and then she lies down on the grass. *Here. I'll even pretend that I don't know.*

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Since it's a Saturday, Will lazes in bed till seven before he gets started on their laundry. Even after four years of living together, he has yet to see a second pair of jeans appear in Hannibal's wardrobe and the older man does not own a single tee shirt, so much for casual attire. He checks his phone just after he's loaded the machine. The whites are piled haphazardly on the dryer to wait their turn.

What he reads is vaguely troubling.

"Morning," says Hannibal as he pops into their utility room and shucks out of his workout clothes to join the load. Will usually takes a hands-on approach to the appreciation of his lover's nude form, but today he just turns on the washing machine and then hands his phone to Hannibal. "Hmm. Perhaps he could get in touch with a counselor? This really isn't my area of expertise."

"Not sure if Mrs Brown is willing to have Esther go in for counseling," says Will. He pulls Hannibal in for a lingering kiss, and then squeezes the older man's bare ass. "Anyway, I'm going out with them to Double Rock later. Would you like to join us?"

Hannibal smiles. "I'd love to. However, I do have to get dressed first."

"Must you?" Will likes hearing Hannibal laugh, and cranes his neck to see the doctor walk regal and naked out of the utility room to grab himself some clothes.

Four years. He's still crazy about Hannibal, still finds something new to adore every time he sees the older man. At the moment he's obsessed with the doctor's ankles and feet, spending hours just tracing the fine bones and veins after they've gone to bed.

They have had their disagreements and fights, some worse than others. Will has a violent temper when roused, and is prone to fits of destruction. Hannibal just becomes cold and clinical. Thankfully they discovered that they usually resolve their problems quickly if they don't see each other for a day or two; their need for each other is stronger than the flames of their anger.

The worst fights have passed. In their first year together, Hannibal even spent nearly three weeks away in New York just to put some space between them after a particularly brutal argument about prematurely retiring the Ripper. Then again, the make-up sex had been *glorious* - they had to reupholster the couch in the living room, repaint the walls, and replace the dining table.

These days they don't really fight. Occasionally they bicker over trivialities, such as the garish new gold-and-white curtains in the study and more recently the dog food, but most of the time they fit together harmoniously. The sex is still great, even without the fighting. Will takes advantage of his youth to test the older man's self-restraint; Hannibal uses his experience to test the record for most number of climaxes a night he can draw out of his lover. In fact, Will blatantly encourages Hannibal's scientific curiosity on that count.

He heads to the kitchen to get the coffee going while he texts Matthew with Hannibal's advice. The doctor appears not long after in a white shirt and slacks, his hair still damp from the shower. He's humming under his breath and Will identifies La Traviata. He joins in on the last verse, his voice too thin to truly carry the melody: "*Dal dì che disse: vivere Io voglio a te fedel, Dell'universo immemore Io vivo quasi in ciel.*"

"Funny," he says after Hannibal graces him with applause, "I was just thinking about how good things are right now." A frown creases his brow. "I hope I didn't jinx us with a run of bad luck."

"I doubt that," says Hannibal with an amused smirk, pulling out sausages and eggs. "Good luck and bad luck are strands of the same rope."

It's too early for philosophizing. Will makes coffee: one for himself, the other for Hannibal, and isn't it domestic that he knows just how his boyfriend takes his coffee without him ever actually trying to know? The young man watches Hannibal prepare breakfast and feels a sense of contentment spread through him.

This is what he wants for the rest of his life. For the rest of their lives.

It's not really an epiphany, more of a re-realization, and it still takes Will's breath away. He excuses himself for a moment and heads into his study.

In the third drawer of his personal desk is a small gray velvet box. He bought it before New Year's Day, but chickened out at the last minute. For the past six months it has sat in the drawer, a welcome weight on his mind. He opens it and stares at the ring inside. If he wants, he can go down to the kitchen and get on one knee and he knows Hannibal will say yes. Yet his heart thunders with trepidation and reluctance at the idea.

It's not perfect, he thinks, *not for Hannibal. He deserves better than a regular Saturday morning. He deserves... He deserves so much more.*

He found the ring online, and arranged the purchase and collection of it to be as discreet as possible. It's an 19th century gold ring, set with four diamonds arranged in a cluster. To be honest, he found it a touch too flashy, but he knows Hannibal can carry it off with aplomb. He can imagine Hannibal showing it off in that discreetly ostentatious manner of his, and can already hear Mrs Komeda's sly compliments. It won't be the wedding band, of course - that, they will choose together.

It's too much for a Saturday morning over breakfast. Will sighs and puts it back in his drawer.

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Hannibal is somewhat bemused by Will's abrupt leaving, but he's never been able to predict Will Graham fully. His lover is quixotic and practical, amoral and principled, stubborn and changeable. He has likened Will to water - in fact, Hannibal has a commissioned watercolor portrait of Will for their coming anniversary. Despite having been with Hannibal for so many years, Will is still determined to pay his own way as far as he can. The fact that Hannibal

spent three years talking Will into a proper birthday celebration is testament to the young man's obstinate and private nature.

In a way, Hannibal is very pleased that Will hasn't altered too much from the teenager the doctor fell for. Even with Hannibal's own formidable personality, Will is still very much his own man. The main difference is that Will is far more confident and polished; now the world can see what a jewel he is, and it adores him.

The doctor is chary of allowing others the liberty to admire Will, however. A small velvet box is sitting in the depths of Hannibal's closet; he's been debating internally over when to proffer it to his lover. He spent the time between patients searching for it, and found the Victorian-style sapphire and diamond ring. Will would probably protest that it's too extravagant, but he will wear it nonetheless. Its simplicity should appeal to Will.

Hannibal is uncharacteristically nervous about taking the next step. He believes that Will won't reject him, but the slim possibility of rejection exists, and Hannibal isn't certain he can take the blow to his ego should the unlikely happen.

Just as he plates breakfast, he hears the trill of his cell phone. It's Beverly Katz calling, and Hannibal sighs. There goes his Saturday.

"Good morning, Beverly. I suppose there's a new case?"

"*Something that looks like an animal attack, except it's weird. Would you be able to come by?*"

"Send me the address."

"*Mm-kay. Say hi to Will for me.*"

Hannibal nods at Will, who has just returned, and bids farewell to the agent. "Beverly says hi," he tells Will, and receives a chaste kiss for the message.

"Is everything okay?" Will asks. "New case?"

"There is one." Hannibal passes Will's breakfast to him. "Let's hope this one is creative."

Will smirks. "Not everyone's a Picasso, Hannibal."

"Is it too much to ask for a Monet or a Kahlo?" Hannibal finishes his coffee. "I suppose my Saturday shall be spent in the company of corpses."

"You won't know until you're there. Could be interesting," says Will. The young man seems hesitant, perhaps even disappointed.

Hannibal cocks his head. "Is there something wrong, Will?"

"No, no, um. Just... I kinda got my hopes up that you'll be with us today." Will pokes at the sausage on his plate, subdued and morose. "Guess I'll see you at dinner then."

The psychiatrist wants to find out more, but he knows when to leave Will alone with his thoughts. The young man will confide in him eventually.

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The setting is an idyllic meadow in the middle of Prince William Forest Park, an ideal spot for a picnic or a camp out, but this one seems to have hosted a feeding frenzy. Hannibal takes in the carnage and savage brutalizing of the two victims. The couple were probably settling in after a pleasant night of stargazing and wine when they were killed. Their tent is in shreds, as are the owners. It's easy to picture what happened: the man was killed first, and then the woman. Neither suffered long - their chests and throats were ripped open, and their blood has been soaked up by the soil beneath.

Oddly enough, the telescope is still standing. Hannibal walks around the perimeter of the scene, and thinks that Will would have liked to see this.

"Animal attack?" Price suggests.

"No animal kills and leaves its kill like this," says Zeller authoritatively. "Look. Ripped open, nothing taken. Other than by the scavenging birds."

Jack peers closely at the wounds. "Those are bite marks, yes?"

"Not of any animal I can recognize," Zeller replies. He snaps a few more photos. "Katz, didja get pictures of the other vic?"

"Better," says Beverly. "I found a boot print. Definitely a male - way too big to be a female."

Jack and Hannibal step away, leaving the forensics to the experts. The FBI agent looks at the scene, bustling with his people and the local PD, and frowns. "No one makes the leap to killing people like this. This is escalation."

"The mutilation pattern is easy to be mistaken for bear or wolf attacks."

"They keep to the hills in summer," says Jack. "Only in fall and winter do they venture closer to human habitations to seek out more food."

Hannibal stares at the kills. They aren't elegant, but there is clarity of vision and purpose. "The killer knows what he wants. The effect he wants to achieve is less important than the act of killing, the sheer physicality of it. As you suspect, I believe this is the first human kill he's made; there may be more coming."

"Zee! Give me estimated TOD!" Jack bellows.

Zeller crouches down and studies the lividity of the nearer corpse. "Ten hours, maybe eight? Can't tell without liver temp."

Price offers the thermometer.

"Eight hours."

Jack scowls. "That's enough time for the killer to hide his tracks."

"Ask around the farms for livestock mauled to death. He'd have started small, but progressed to larger creatures. Cattle, horses." A name crawls back to Hannibal's mind. It's been years, and Hannibal hasn't kept track of his progress. If this is his handiwork, then he has truly evolved into a spectacular creature. "This man believes he is acting like an animal, but in his savagery he is displaying himself as a man. It could be a case of a delusional mind. However, an autopsy will help determine what was used. Perhaps that will narrow down the search."

"Do you know of anyone with such a psychosis?" Jack asks. "A man believing himself to be a beast?"

"Species dysphoria is very uncommon. I have only treated some with gender dysphoria." The lie is easy. "It's a difficult way to live, believing that you are born in the wrong body."

*****

Matthew and Will stroll behind Esther, who is holding the leash for Buster, while Winston trots calmly next to his beloved master.

"A counselor?" Matthew mulls over the idea. "That's only if mom allows. I mean, I needed speech therapy, obviously, but she seems intent on believing that Esther's latest incidents are h-her acting out. Or regressing."

"Doesn't her school provide one?" Will asks. Esther has come back to them to get Winston's lead. "Here's their leashes, Esther. Stay where we can see you."

"Okay." It's not their first time at the dog park, but Will makes her repeat the instruction anyway. At the moment there aren't many people with their dogs, so both young men feel safe allowing Esther to lead the dogs. Once the afternoon crowd appears, Esther will not want to stay longer. Like Will, she feels crowded in and severely overwhelmed by too much stimuli.

Matthew puffs out his cheeks and stuffs his hands in his pockets. "They did. She was doing well with Ms Karan too. But Ms Karan had a heart attack and had to retire to Florida for her health."

"The new one?"

"Esther likes her but not enough to want to talk to her. She's nice," says Matthew. "A Mrs Mott. She says Esther is very well-behaved, other than her tendency to wander off on field trips, so now Mrs Mott makes sure Esther's friends know what to do when she starts going off on her own."

Will chews on his lower lip. "I just hope she's not... I mean, you hear stories and you kind of fear the worst."

"Not sexually assaulted, no. I hope. I've taught her to bite anyone who tries to touch her inappropriately and to scream her head off if they do. I'm there when she has medical

examinations." Matthew looks ferocious for a moment. "But if anyone has done something to Esther, I'll fucking kill him."

"I know the feeling." Will doesn't want his friend to brood, so he says, "Change of topic. I wanna ask your opinion."

"On?"

"I, um... You know Hannibal and I, we've been together for some time. And um, while I usually don't pay attention to his age, he is forty-five now and I wonder if, uh... Shit, this is hard."

Matthew raises his eyebrows and waits. And waits. "Sometime today, Will?"

"Should I propose to Hannibal?"

"Propose wh- *Fuck me,* Will, are you serious?" Matthew slaps a hand over his mouth at the unseemly exclamation. His next statement is hushed and awed. "Are you really serious?"

Will fights down the blush. "I-I guess. I mean, I love him, and he's not getting younger and- Sometimes we're at one of his society events and more and more of those socialites try to come on to me. He thinks I don't see it but I know he gets kinda worried. I just want him to know I'm in this, for life. But... It's only been three and a half years. Am I jumping the gun?"

Matthew looks incredulous. "Will Graham. You are probably the stupidest guy I know."

"Excuse me?"

"He obviously loves you. And you definitely love him. Propose to him already! Besides, you two behave like a married couple anyway. Remember the time you had a tiff over Winston and you came to my place? He was about to tear down the door to get to you." Matthew laughs and shakes his head. "Man, I wouldn't want to get on his bad side."

"No, me neither."

"So how are you gonna do it?"

"Well, I've bought the ring already," Will says, suddenly bashful. "I don't know if I want to make it really over the top, or keep it private, low-key and everything. And I don't wanna screw this up, you know? He's the best thing that ever happened to me."

"I'm sure he'll say the same thing about you." Matthew laughs again. "Wow. Whichever way you choose, he'll love it. It's you, you know? You make him crazy."

Just then Winston comes back, his tail wagging. His leash drags on the ground behind him. Will scratches behind his ears. "Hey boy."

"Where's Esther?" Matthew asks abruptly. He peers around, panic rising. "Will, *where is she?*"

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Matthew hands Esther's scrunchie to Will for Winston to sniff.

"Winston, find," Will commands. He is all dominance now, his eyes scanning the area and his movements sure. "Come on, Matthew. I'm sure she hasn't gone far."

Matthew battens down his frantic fear and follows. His skin breaks into goosebumps; he resolutely does not think of what may have happened to his baby sister. *Esther's a smart girl,* he tells himself. *She'll scream for us if she's attacked.*

Suddenly, Winston starts barking and loping downhill from the trail.

Matthew can see how easy it must have been for Esther to take that path, probably after the insatiably curious Buster. He wishes he hasn't been that engrossed in his conversation; an irrational part of him blames Will for distracting him.

"Esther?" Will calls out. "Esther, sweetheart, where are you?"

"Esther! Esther, where are you?" Matthew shouted. "Sweetheart, you're scaring Mattie!"

They hear the whines and then Winston woofs again, leading them towards a copse of closely grown trees. Matthew plunges after him and sees Buster curled up on the ground, bleeding. Buster whines and licks Matthew's hand.

Will appears not long after, some leaves stuck to his shirt. He picks up the small dog and checks on his wounds. "Buster?"

Winston growls and barks at some unseen presence, looking away from the two young men. Matthew feels something prickle up his spine. "Will, we gotta leave here. Come on."

To his credit, Will doesn't disagree. He cradles Buster under one arm and they quickly backtrack to the trail. Winston takes the lead once they're out from the shelter of the trees. Then they hear something crashing through branches and leaves. Then a creature lands behind them, something that looks like it comes from a nightmare.

Matthew gapes. "The hell-?"

"Come on!" Will urges, not sparing time to look at the *thing* chasing them.

Then they hear the screaming from somewhere inside the grove where they have just escaped from. It's a familiar voice, and Matthew immediately circles back towards the broken fence.

Will almost stumbles when he follows on Matthew's heels. "Dammit, Mattie!"

The thing pursuing them tries to cut across their path as they double back, but Matthew is running on more than adrenaline. He ducks under the thing's snapping jaws and grasping claws, and charges headlong into the grove, right towards the sound of his sister's screams.

*****

Will knows it's a person inside that strange skeletal contraption, but he has no weapon on him to contend with the deadly fangs nor the talons. The good thing is that the bone armor seems to be too heavy for the man inside to catch up to Will, so the young man dashes towards his friend. They come to the base of a tree and Esther is in the branches. Smart girl: she must have climbed up when the bone guy appeared.

"Get up there," Will orders. "Quickly!"

Matthew doesn't argue. His long limbs allow for fast ascent. Will hands Buster to him, and then clambers up himself. He's nearly not fast enough. The man in the bone armor barges forward and lunges at Will's legs. Thankfully, Will has swung up with Matthew's help.

"I didn't tell!" Esther is shrieking at the man. "I didn't! You can't kill me, I didn't tell!"

"This was her nightmare?" Will asks.

Matthew raises his eyebrows as he keeps a steady hand on his baby sister. "Perhaps now isn't the time to talk about this!"

The injured Buster growls and barks at the bestial man below, while Esther is hysterically crying.

Will digs out his cell phone and calls 911.

"There's a crazy man attacking us on Double Rock Park trail there's a kid here we're all in a tree hurry up!" Will doesn't pause for breath.

The dispatcher thankfully doesn't question anything but tells Will to stay on the line. Will hands the cell to Matthew but asks for the latter's phone, and then calls Hannibal.

"Matthew?"

"Will, actually. We're stuck in a tree, there's a guy in a bone suit trying to kill us, I've called 911. Please tell me you're not at Quantico!"

"I just parked outside my office. I'm coming immediately."

So there's that. Will grits his teeth and snarls at the beast-man below. Through the gaps in the monstrous jaw, Will can see his eyes, and for some reason Will thinks he's looking into the eyes of an animal. He bares his own teeth again while the beast-man circles the tree for several minutes.

"We've called the cops," Matthew shouts down to their would-be attacker. Esther has quietened down to terrified hiccups, clinging desperately to her older brother. He's answered by a growl.

"It's pointless," says Will. "He's subsumed into the mentality of an animal, or what he thinks is an animal. *No, Winston!*"

The scrappy mongrel dives in low and sinks his teeth into the bone-suit-man's calf, which has been left exposed. The attacker howls and then snaps his constructed beast jaws over Winston.

Will hears a terrible scream - that would be Esther, he thinks, mind suspended in that horrifying instant - and several cracks, and then Winston's agonized yowl. The beast-man tosses Winston aside. Suddenly he lunges and drags Will down by one leg. Matthew shouts and grabs hold of Will with one hand, bracing himself backwards against a sturdy branch.

Matthew is unable to pull Will up while steadying Esther. Will tumbles and lands on top of the bone-armor guy. Winded, he rolls over just in time to avoid the huge, monstrous jaws closing about his face, and rolls again to dodge the raking claws. He's not fast enough, however; he hears the rip across the tee shirt rather than feel the burn of the wound, but Matthew is yelling now and then there are gunshots.

Bone-armor guy peers up, glares down at Will, and chooses to run when another shot is fired.

No, Will thinks, his belly suddenly on fire while his arms and legs feel like they're slowly submerged into ice. *Not like this.*

"Will? Will, please don't die, Dr Lecter's gonna kill us if you die. Come on, you still have to propose to him."

He hears Matthew calling from above, but he can't focus. Esther is begging now, saying something like *I didn't tell, you can't die I didn't tell I didn't tell.* He wants to reassure the girl, but his hand is shaking as he reaches up to touch her face. No, he's smeared her pretty face with blood. That's not good.

"So-sorry," he ekes out, and tries his best to smile. "Sweetie. It's okay. I'm okay."

"I didn't tell, you can't die cause I didn't tell, please," Esther pleads.

Some other shadows carry her away and some bend over Will. He thinks about Winston and Buster, about their injuries, and hopes Matthew gets them to the vet asap. They need medical care now. He's rescued them from the pound, they deserve to have happy lives.

Then he thinks of Hannibal making breakfast, of maroon eyes crinkling in that strange almost-smile. His last thought, just before his vision blanks out, is to wonder what Hannibal's expression will be when Will gets on one knee and proffers the ring.

Chapter End Notes

Dal dì che disse... translates as
Since the day when she told me

“I want to live, faithful to you alone!”
I have forgotten the world
And lived like one in heaven.

The ring Will got for Hannibal
The ring Hannibal got for Will

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal is only five minutes from the park when he sees the ambulance pulling away in another direction. His phone rings. It's Matthew calling. Disregarding the ticket he'll receive should the traffic police stop him, he picks up his cell phone and follows the ambulance.

"Will?" he says, hoping that it's Randall Tier or even Matthew in the vehicle he follows.

"Will's h-hurt," Matthew says over the phone, his voice shaky and muffled over the sound of other people - police officers - talking. *"They're sending him to J-ohns Hopkins. Winston and Buster are going to the vet."*

On the second word Hannibal's heart lurches. His mind pulses with horrific images reminiscent of the crime scene from this morning. Hannibal's hands tighten on his Bentley's steering wheel as though afflicted with rigor mortis.

"How badly is Will hurt?" he hears himself ask with deceptive calm. The mask of Dr Lecter falls over him, a hermetically-sealed shroud. It's astounding that his heartbeat does not quicken; he files away that observation for another time.

"Penetrating abdominal trauma. I couldn't really see how severe the wound is, I tried to keep it closed, to reduce blood loss, and the police got there fast. He passed out. I think his abdomen is punctured but his guts are intact. I'm so sorry, I couldn't-" Matthew is babbling now, and Hannibal is in no mood to placate or soothe him.

"Quiet," Hannibal snaps. Then he calms down slightly. "It's not your fault. Have the officers take you to the hospital, some FBI agents will want to talk to you when they get here."

He ends the call, and then rings up Jack Crawford. The agent's deep voice sounds distracted. "Yes, Dr Lecter?"

"He struck again," says Hannibal. "Will, his friend and his friend's sister were attacked in Double Rock Park. I'm headed to the trauma center at Johns Hopkins. Will's been hurt. The other two should come here as well."

*****

It's peaceful.

Will casts the line and watches it unfurl. Swallows and swifts weave an intricate dance overhead; insects buzz nature's concertos with great fervor. The water is at the right temperature, and sings quietly over the multicolored pebbles at Will's feet.

His father watches the cast. "Nice work, son."

"Thanks, dad." Will takes in the calm blue of the skies, the whisper of wind, the placid trees. "This is nice."

"Do you want to stay here?" Dave Graham casts his own line now, the lure landing slightly further than Will's. The breeze rises and plays with Will's curls.

"I don't know. Is Hannibal gonna be here?" Will peers around. "I have something to give him. If I stay, I can't."

"Hannibal isn't a good person, son." Dave doesn't sound disapproving. He sounds like he's talking about the weather.

In a way, it is very apt. Hannibal isn't a good person. Will sometimes thinks Hannibal isn't a person at all. "No, he's not. He's complex, and cruel, and careful. He's not good." He tilts his head and stares into the rippling water. "But he's *mine.* And that's what matters to me."

"He kills people. He's a murderer. I thought you knew the difference between good and bad."

"I do," says Will. "Hannibal is a murderer, but he's *my* murderer, and he kills those that deserve to die."

Dave Graham shakes his head sadly. "Because you say so?"

"Because I say so," agrees Will. "Because I know the difference between good and bad. Sometimes the law is too lenient a punishment."

"You can't judge others, Will. It's not your place."

"If I followed your advice, then my place," says Will, dropping his rod, "would have been a grave, mourned by no one. I'm in a better place now, dad. My place is right beside Hannibal."

*****

"I will operate." Hannibal's tone brooks no disagreement. "I was a trauma surgeon here."

"Dr Lecter, you know we don't advise doctors to operate on their family, and this is against all protocol-"

"Dr Anders, there is no one in this world more invested in Will Graham than I," says Hannibal. He lets the monster inside unfurl its claws and teeth for a split second, and has the satisfaction of Dr Anders stepping away. "Now, please don't waste his time. I have to scrub. You may be present to assist if you so wish."

*****

Matthew holds Esther's hand as they wait in a small office. It is a tidy place, and quiet; he asked for someplace that isn't too bustling because Esther is easily set off under stress, and he's not sure he can deal with her at this time. She is reciting the summer constellations under her breath as instructed by her brother. The distraction is calming her down. He wishes it

could calm him down too. He still can see the dried blood - Will's blood - crusted under his nails. He feels sick, not knowing if he helped save Will's life or not.

The attack was over so quickly. Thankfully the man did not gut Will, but the amount of blood that gushed out - Matthew swallows, refusing to gag - and coated Matthew's hands - he remembers scrambling down the tree with Buster in his arms and then putting him aside, his voice hoarse, and Esther begging Will not to die because she didn't tell- Matthew has to shut his eyes.

When a Child Services officer turns up with Mrs Brown, Esther stands up without complaint. *She needs me to hold it together,* Matthew thinks, and is grateful for her presence.

"Sweetheart, you answer this nice lady here everything she asks you, okay? You answer honestly," says Matthew as he kisses his sister on the brow, and lets his mother lead Esther away by the hand.

He's already given his statement to one of the police officers, who patiently listened despite Matthew's stammering, and now he sees Ms Katz striding towards him.

"Matthew, are you okay? Esther?" She sits beside him and doesn't offer a hug.

He's thankful she hasn't asked about Will. "I'm f-fine. Esther w-w-with Child Services a-and my mom. They couldn't question her earlier, she w-as so freaked."

The agent laces her fingers together. "I hear Hannibal is operating on Will."

"Yeah," says Matthew. "The two officers who put us here talked a bit about it. I thought it isn't encouraged. Possible emotional trauma or something."

"I think Hannibal would prefer the guild of failing to save Will than the helplessness of knowing he could have saved him," says Ms Katz quietly.

"That guy came out of nowhere," says Matthew. "And Esther knew him, said that she didn't tell. She's been having nightmares and... I couldn't even begin to guess that *that* was what she'd been terrified of."

Ms Katz smiles. "Maybe Alana can get her to talk."

"You mean Dr Bloom?"

"Yeah. She was told to come in after Hannibal called us. She's great with people who have experienced trauma." Ms Katz pats his shoulder. "She likes Esther. She'll definitely be able to help."

Matthew slouches in his seat. "I just keep thinking, what if he had got Esther first?" His voice cracks on the question and his hand comes up to shield his eyes. "She's so small, she wouldn't have survived. It's h-orrible but I can't help being thankful that it was Will, that it wasn't my baby sister. Fuck, I-I mean, I mean, I'd be okay if it were me, but it could've been Esther-"

The FBI agent doesn't comment, but stays in the seat beside the young man and lets him cry it out. When he is marginally under control, she says, "We've sent some of our best people there. We'll get him."

"What if Will-"

"As if Hannibal will let him die without marrying him in a lavish ceremony," Ms Katz jokes weakly. "He was one of the best trauma surgeons ever to work in this hospital. He'll save Will."

*****

"I don't think I should be here," Will says. He looks around again. "This place feels wrong."

With utter serenity, Dave casts his line again. "Where do you intend to go, son? What do you intend to do?"

"I... I must go back," says Will, and wades towards the bank. For some reason, it doesn't get nearer. Will tries again. "I must go back. Hannibal will miss me. Winston and Buster. And I have something to give to Hannibal. I mustn't stay."

"You might not be able to come here again, Will," Dave calls out from behind him.

Will doesn't turn to look at his father. "I don't need to come back. I need to be with Hannibal. I'm... I'm to ask him to be my husband. I even got the ring. See?" He pulls it from his pocket - he's suddenly in his old, tattered jeans, the ones he threw out the first night he stayed in Hannibal's house, and the same frayed flannel shirt and tee, he's seventeen again, and what he holds in his hand is a smooth white pebble. It changes to become a cratered, dusty rock; it's the moon, sitting in his palm.

"No, where's the ring? Where's the ring?" Will starts searching through his pockets, the moon left to drop into the river, and Will panics when he can't find the ring. "Dad, where's the ring?"

He hears hooves behind him and he turns; he's no longer in the river, he's in the study, and a stag towers over him. Black as a moonless night, with eyes of blood. It huffs, great clouds of its breath steaming from its nostrils; Will notices only now that he's naked and it's cold.

"Where's Hannibal?" Will asks, because it's what he's supposed to ask. The stag doesn't answer, but starts trotting away. There is faint music coming from the walls. Will strains his hearing, and just barely makes out what it is. "Der Erlkönig? Really? You have your own theme music? That's really egoistic."

The stag harrumphs and tosses its antlered head, as though mildly offended, but it stays close as it leads Will down corridors that he's sure does not exist in their home.

"I want Hannibal," he whispers, suddenly feeling very lost and frightened. "I need him."

*****

It's the first time Hannibal is relieved he is a sadist, a psychopath, and an excellent actor. Where other surgeons may have trembled to operate on their loved ones, Hannibal just leashed the human side of him and let his true self out. Pain and suffering are nothing to him; he is creating, reclaiming. The body torn open before him is to be elevated into a living, breathing Will Graham, the only living person he will worship as pure art. This is the first time he is consciously using that aspect of himself to save a life, the only life he will ever die to save.

His hands are almost supernaturally steady as they work. He's detached from the moment, reacting quickly to every minute response, years of absence from the operating theater dissipating; the almost obscenely *intimate* feel of his Will makes the monster purr. Hannibal deliberately doesn't think of the body below his hands as his lover's. He's almost on autopilot, doing what needs to be done, but he knows he'll need space and time to resolve the emotional fallout from the surgery later. He isn't immune to emotional trauma, and he's not so proud to think that he can survive Will's death.

Should Will Graham not survive this, then the Chesapeake Ripper is going to go on a spree wild and deadly enough to become *legend*.

*****

Will follows the ink-black stag, and they step out of the house onto a gravel path, right outside Will's old house. It's autumn again, and Will is wrapped in the first coat that Hannibal got him.

"It's already demolished," he tells the stag, but when he looks it has gone. Will looks around him into the dark wood, desperately trying to locate the beast. "Wait, what am I supposed to do? Where is Hannibal?"

"He's saving your life. He always does."

Will swivels on his right heel and comes face to face with Abigail's father. He nearly screams. Instead, he backs away, and then stands his ground. He's not the scared teenager he was. "You're dead."

Garrett Jacob Hobbs is not the snarling, raving madman Will remembers. "Yes. Your Hannibal killed me."

"You died too easy," says Will, fists clenching.

"How would you have me killed then?" asks the man.

"Gutted," says Will, and then suddenly there's a knife in his hand. He steps forward and stabs it into the dead man's belly, and drags it across and up. Will steps away and studies what he has done. "I'd make you bleed out."

"Interesting." Hobbs looks down at his wound. Then there's a knife in *his* hand, and it's stabbed into Will's side, two, three times, and Will doesn't even defend himself; he falls to his knees and onto his side.

It hurts, it *hurts,* and it's not supposed to, is it? Will shuts his eyes and wants so much to wake up, this can't be real.

A hand falls on Will's shoulder. When he looks, it's not Hobbs, it's Hannibal holding a scalpel as he rolls Will onto his back. They are on their bed at home, the lights dimmed, and Hannibal is naked. So is Will. That's the correct state of things.

"Hannibal?" he whispers. It's cold.

"My Will," Hannibal says. He slices the scalpel vertically down Will's chest, and does the same to his own. Then the older man digs into his chest and pulls out a fist-sized organ, still beating rhythmically. "My heart."

Will doesn't even scream. This is right. This is the right thing to do. He reaches into his chest and finds his heart. Carefully, he extracts it, cradles the pumping organ with both hands. "Here, Hannibal. Here's mine."

They exchange hearts, and Will tries to tuck Hannibal's into his own body, but it slips from his hands and dirties the bedding.

"I'm sorry," Will murmurs. "Maybe you can do it for me?"

Hannibal bends down and kisses Will's brow. "Of course, mon amour. And I will keep your heart safe inside me."

The doctor places his own heart into Will, carefully pressing the edges of the incision closed.

"Now, mongoose," says Hannibal softly, "if you die, I shall die with you."

*****

*****

Matthew jerks to his feet when Dr Lecter finally comes into the office. It's been hours. He's washed the blood from his hands, and someone gave him one of those shirts for the patients to replace his own bloodied one. Ms Katz has left with the shirt, in case there is transfer from the attacker to Will to Matthew. Esther is asleep on the narrow couch in the office, Matthew's denim shirt covering her. Their mother is dozing beside Esther. When the doctor sees the two sleeping, he nods for Matthew to step out.

"Will?" the young man asks.

"Safe," says Dr Lecter, "for now. They'll watch over him. There was grade II liver laceration and intestinal perforation, so he'll be in here for some time to undergo an antibiotic treatment and to watch for signs of infection. It's eight weeks lost to recovery, but it's better than the alternative. How are you and Esther?"

"We're fine. Um, Ms Katz said that the dogs are okay, they're at a vet - here," says Matthew, passing him a scrawled note. He feels terribly guilty.

Dr Lecter slips the vet's address into his pocket. "Don't feel guilty, Matthew. Feel angry. Anger is a motivating force."

Matthew's jaw tenses. "I do feel angry, Dr Lecter. The bastard hurt my best friend and terrorized my baby sister."

There is a lengthy silence, heavy with unsaid words. The older man studies Matthew and eventually asks, "What will you do when we find him?"

"I'll kill him." Then Matthew registers the exact words the doctor used. A shiver crawls down Matthew's spine - he's seen it before, recognized it, and has nearly forgotten the simple knowledge: Dr Hannibal Lecter is *dangerous*.

Dr Lecter tilts his head and regards him carefully. It seems to Matthew that the doctor is weighing the young man up; Matthew hopes he's not found wanting.

"I suggest your family go home now, Matthew," says the older man. Then, as though in an afterthought, Dr Lecter adds, "I will have a favor to ask of you tomorrow."

Without a doubt, Matthew knows he will perform this favor.

*****

When Will wakes up, he's quite disoriented. It's dark outside but he can hear traffic, so he assumes it's night time.

A handsome older gentleman comes into view. "Will. You're awake."

"Hi," Will slurs. His throat feels dry. "Thirsty."

He's given an ice chip to suck on, and then another. The older man watches Will fondly, and Will finds himself feeling bashful at the gaze. When his throat isn't as parched, he asks, "Where am I?"

"Johns Hopkins. You've just had major surgery," says the man. He looks tired in the glow of the fluorescent lights. Will wants to brush the silvery blond hair from his eyes; he tries to sit up but the man keeps him horizontal. His side and belly feel sore. "Don't try to move, mon rêve. You're not ready to move about yet."

"Are you my doctor?" Will asks. He takes the man's right hand and squeezes it. For some reason, he wants to kiss the fingers. "Thank you."

The man chuckles and pulls over a chair. "I had to bully my way into the operating theater. It's not wise to operate on family."

Will is decidedly loopy. He's very certain that this older man is not his father, so at least that is sorted. An uncle? But Will doesn't find any familial feeling for him. If anything, he has the overwhelming urge to crawl into the man's lap and kiss him. "Are we family?"

"Not yet," says the man. He peers at Will. "Will, are you all right?"

"I don't remember you right now," Will mumbles. His head feels heavy. "Who are you?"

The man smiles broadly and kisses Will's brow. "I'm Hannibal. Your boyfriend."

"Really? Wow." Will lets his head loll to the left to look at Hannibal better. "You're fucking hot. How did I land you? Are you really my boyfriend?"

"Yes, I am." Hannibal laughs and kisses Will's cheek tenderly. "Go to sleep, mongoose."

"Mm-kay. Wow. I must be the luckiest guy in the world." The younger man grasps Hannibal's hand and cradles it against his neck, in an unconscious mimicry of a far different evening.

*****

Hannibal doesn't extract his trapped hand until he is certain Will has nodded off. The bit of temporary amnesia has alleviated some of the doctor's worries, but there still is the matter of him breaching hospital procedures and protocol, as well as the more pressing issue of Randall Tier.

He can't tell Jack about him, since he still has to maintain doctor-patient confidentiality. He doesn't want to tell either. While the psychiatrist in him is pleased at Randall's progress and evolution, Hannibal is outraged that his lover has been injured.

Will looks washed out under the hospital's lights. Hannibal brushes back the dark curls and feels the pangs of affection resonate inside him. This utterly perfect being is his weak spot, and right now he is asleep. It will be a long month or two before Will is recovered properly enough. Hannibal sighs. He will put aside thoughts of marriage until Will is better.

There is someone knocking on the door. Alana Bloom enters with a leather satchel - Hannibal's go-bag, a habit left over from his days as a surgeon.

"How is he?"

"He woke up briefly," says Hannibal. He can't hide the fatigue nor the love from his tone. "How angry is the director?"

"I think the word 'livid' is a pretty accurate description. Still, he's safe." Alana goes to the other side of Will's bed.

"If he had not survived the operation, I would not have walked out of the theater," Hannibal admits readily. His shoulders sag and he has to swallow the emotion threatening to well up in his throat. "I will make amends when Will is more cognizant."

Alana smiles warmly. "You saved his life. While it was unorthodox for you to perform surgery, you're not unqualified." She studies the young man, pallid against the sheets and the shock of dark brown hair framing his face, and watches the monitors. "The one life you must save, and you did it splendidly."

"What did Esther say?" Hannibal changes the topic deliberately. He can't think of what might have happened.

"The class went on a field trip to the Maryland Science Center to view the new exhibit on prehistoric animals. She wandered off and... she came across a secret room in the back, she said, and because it was open, she peeped. Apparently she saw the suit of bones. Whoever the man was caught her looking and threatened her."

Hannibal narrows his eyes. "She wouldn't have been able to assess if the threat was real."

"No," says Alana sadly. "She told me she started having nightmares every time she wanted to tell Matthew. I hope they catch the man soon."

"Catching him won't end Esther's nightmares," says Hannibal. He stood up and took his bag. "I'll refresh myself and come back with coffee."

Alana knows Hannibal won't be heading home. "Why don't you shower, and then I'll get us some dinner from the deli we used to frequent?"

The older man nods assent, and casts one loving look at Will before he exits. He has to plan.

Chapter End Notes

What do you mean real life trauma center protocol? Hanni does what Hanni wants.
And yes, Will Graham is one snarky asshole even in his own head.
Der Erlkönig
Yes, I referenced that ultra-cute video of a guy forgetting who his wife is after surgery.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Will wakes again, he's a lot more cogent and coherent than his first waking.

Hannibal is in a chair next to him, in a sweater and soft pants. His head is dipped forwards, and his fringe falls in his eyes. There is a gray cast to his features, and the usually clean-shaven doctor has a five o'clock shadow that's rapidly edging towards eight o'clock. His posture also leads him to snore very faintly. It should be an amusing sight. Will thinks his heart might burst with love for him.

Outside the window the sky is growing bright. Hannibal wakes with a slow blink, as though to recalibrate, and then he's alert. Will smiles tenderly at his boyfriend. So many mornings that they've woken up, usually while it's still dark; sometimes, if either of them is feeling particularly amorous, they remain in bed until it is fully bright before Hannibal goes to the kitchen to make breakfast for them both.

This is a rare deviation from the norm, but Will still can't help loving how golden light gilds Hannibal's face. When that happens, Hannibal looks like a god.

"Hey there," says the doctor, and comes over to bring a glass of water with a straw to Will's lips. "Just a sip. You're not to be drinking too much yet."

"Hey yourself," says Will after his tongue no longer feels like it sticks to the roof of his mouth. "How long was I out?"

"Not long enough," says Hannibal. He kisses Will's brow and sighs. "I thought we were past the almost-dying part of our relationship."

The young man rests his cheek against Hannibal's hand. "I'm sorry, but in my defense he pulled me out of the tree I was in." He frowns and asks, "Matthew and Esther?"

"They're safe."

Will exhales slowly. "And the dogs?"

"Buster's all right, but Winston has to wear a cast for a bit." Hannibal curls a finger into Will's hair lovingly. "They're with Alana for the moment until we go home."

"Your patients?"

"They can survive a week without me. I'm not going back to the office until I know you're recuperating properly."

Will basks in Hannibal's affectionate regard for the moment, before frowning faintly again. "Shouldn't you be telling my doctor that I'm awake?"

"Your doctor knows," says Hannibal with a smug little smile. "You'll be sleeping with him to repay your debt, by the way."

From his lover's expression, Will knows what Hannibal has done. He snorts. "You're pimping me out, Dr Lecter? Tsk tsk."

"Well," says the older man, "I did want to pay him, but he refused all monetary recompense. I trust it is in no way a punishment."

"Depends on what the doctor would like," Will says with a sly smirk.

"Nothing until your abdomen has recovered fully," says Hannibal, abruptly all business. "I'm estimating a month, barring infection, of which I will make sure does not happen. You're also under a strict diet and exercise regime."

Will exhales heavily and places a hand gingerly on where the pain is. The medication is making him slightly loopy, and there is a faint ache echoing in his body.

"You've had your hands inside me," he remarks, and takes Hannibal's in his own cold ones. "Did you like it?"

"Yes," Hannibal murmurs. "Does that worry you?"

Will's crooked smile is answer enough.

The doctor sighs. He wishes he can have Will sitting with his back against him. "I wish I didn't need gloves, but you bear my mark within you now. You've been branded."

"You put your initials on my liver or something?"

"That's for me to know."

"You shouldn't have had to perform the surgery," says Will. He exhales. "Aren't there rules against that sort of thing?"

"It's not encouraged, but it's not illegal. Given that no one wants you alive more than me, I thought it best to take on the challenge," says Hannibal. His tone hardens. "And I didn't want someone else becoming acquainted with you in that way."

"You're a scary boyfriend."

"I've been told that, yes." Hannibal's eyes crinkle vaguely in the subdued manner of his.

There is a knock on the door and when they look over, it's Beverly. She has a bouquet of bright yellow and pink flowers. Will cheers up on seeing them. Beverly is dressed in a lovely green silk blouse, her rich black tresses in a braid. "Hey kiddo."

"Hi Bev. Thanks."

"I'll look for a receptacle," says Hannibal, and steps out of the room.

Beverly perches on the side of the bed and takes one of Will's hands. "You all right?"

"I've been better, but this is okay for now. I'm all doped up on meds."

"You really scored in your boyfriend, huh. Doctor, surgeon, psychiatrist, chef." Beverly ruffles Will's curls. "Lucky you."

Will grins. "Your girlfriend is all that too, you know."

"She'll never want to operate on me," says the woman with a smile. "I'm just amazed at how calm Hannibal must've been in the operating room."

"He's amazing like that."

"Well," says Beverly with a quick peck on Will's forehead, "Amazing boyfriends aside, I just wanted to update you that we've ID'ed the guy. A Randall Tier. Did you get a good look at him?"

Will tries to recall the attack. "No, not really. It was... it was all in his eyes. Like I was just staring at a bear or a wolf, not a person."

The agent purses her lips. She's always preferred evidence, so Will's opinions are not helpful at all. She stands and smiles at Hannibal, who has just come in, and updates him. "We're staking out Tier's home and office. He's bound to turn up at one of them."

"Good luck with that," says Hannibal sincerely.

"Mm. I'd love some good luck. I'm bringing the trainee with me, and she's so bushy-tailed and energetic that I hate her." Beverly's smile puts the lie to her words, however. "I'll bring Miriam around when I can. Bye Will, bye Hannibal. Take care now, and get well soon, okay?"

*****

"Matthew. Good afternoon."

"Oh, hi." Matthew puts aside the laundry he is folding. "Dr Lecter. How is Will?"

"Thank you for your concern. He's awake, and will be allowed to move about tomorrow or the day after," says Dr Lecter. He sounds like he is in an empty room. *"You remember that I need you to do me a favor?"*

"Yes. Anything." Matthew's heart starts racing, though for what reason he is entirely uncertain.

"*Come to my home tonight. What time should I expect you?"*

"I can come out at ten, Esther'll be in bed by then and Mom'll be home at 9.30pm." Matthew hesitates a moment. He trusts Dr Lecter, but something about this whole thing feels fishy. "What kind of favor, Dr Lecter?"

"I'll tell you more when I see you. Goodbye, Matthew."

After he hangs up, Matthew stares at the phone in his hand for a few minutes. His gut tells him that Dr Lecter is about to ask Matthew to cross a dangerous line. The right thing to do would be to call back and decline, and he knows the older man would never mention it again. The thing is, he wants to follow Dr Lecter. He's certain this is about Will, and Will nearly died. Will Graham, who never once made fun of his stutter or got frustrated with him, who adores Esther, who willingly spends time with him and his sister. Will who cares for them more than Matthew's mother, who stays with them out of obligation and never stood up for Matthew or Esther when Ella was living with them.

Ella. The thought of his mother's late girlfriend makes Matthew's skin crawl. He knows she was mutilated at her death. He had suspected something off about the doctor then; there had been this sense of smug satisfaction when they came for the funeral.

Now he is sure that Dr Lecter was the murderer.

It should scare him.

It doesn't.

*****

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"I feel gross," Will complains groggily. His hair is greasy and lank, and Hannibal buries his nose in the dark curls to intoxicate himself with the younger man's scent. "Oh, come *on,* Hannibal. I've not showered for more than a day. I smell horrible."

"You never smell horrible, mon amour," Hannibal replies, and kisses Will. He can't stop touching his lover; a part of him is wary that this is a mirage. He has cancelled his appointments for the week, even though Will assures him that he will be perfectly fine. "I will go home. Tomorrow you will have to be up and about, and I will be here again."

Will smiles tiredly. "That's all I did today, Hannibal. Other than being questioned by Beverly, I've done nothing else but sleep." He touches his abdomen and then sighs. "Will it scar?"

"Do you want it to?"

"I don't know. Do you want it to scar? It is where you've put your hands in me."

"I have put other parts of me inside you too. Too many times to count, in fact, and many more times to come," says Hannibal with a straight face. He then smiles broadly and rubs his thumb under Will's lips.

Will rolls his eyes, too weak with pain suppressants to do more. "No one ever believes the elegant and sophisticated Dr Lecter cracks dirty jokes."

"I merely state observations, but *you* interpret them as dirty jokes. That tells us a lot more about you." The older man smirks as he pulls on a jacket. "I'll bring you Vitamin E to reduce

scarring. See you tomorrow."

"Hannibal?" Will reaches up for a hug. When Hannibal has him in a careful embrace, Will whispers, "Don't do anything rash. The FBI is already hunting him."

"What would you have me do?" Hannibal says quietly.

"I know how you feel," says Will, and Hannibal believes so. "But Esther is the one who needs help, not me. She's seen a monster."

The doctor pulls away and studies Will. "Monsters can be slain."

"Yes," says Will. This may be cruel of him, but he knows that this is the best option. "Show her that heroes exist too."

"I see." Hannibal falls oddly introspective. He regards his lover, thinking through the various possibilities. "I suppose you think him capable of this?"

"For Esther, he'll do anything." Will's lashes flutter and he relaxes into the pillow with a deep exhalation. "I know you can help."

*****

Matthew is very punctual. "Dr Lecter. Hi."

"Hello. Come on in," says the psychiatrist graciously. He looks refreshed, though dressed to leave. Probably he's returning to the hospital to stay with Will.

Matthew toes off his shoes and follows the older man into the kitchen. He is less intimidated as he used to be by the grandeur of the house, but it has always been evident that this is the heart of Dr Lecter's home and self. Matthew wonders how long it took Will to get used to the understated wealth that permeates every surface. Other rooms in the house are not as magazine perfect as this spotless kitchen, and the thing is, Matthew knows this pristine condition is due to constant maintenance. The psychiatrist cooks daily, after all.

Dr Lecter pours out a glass of water and offers a slice of raspberry cheesecake. "Will asks after Esther. How is she coping?"

"She had another nightmare," says Matthew. He thanks the doctor for the dessert and drink - by now, he has learned that the older man appreciates politeness - and adds, "She sleeps in my bed now, and I camp out on the floor. She refuses to sleep alone. She fought Mom last night when Mom tried to force her to go to her room."

"She learned a lesson. The monster under the bed can be very real."

"But the monster is a man."

"Esther may not be able to grasp that concept." The older man blinks slowly. "Not without help."

*****

Hannibal watches Matthew absorb that idea. He finds it interesting that Will wants to push his best friend towards darkness, but understands Will's concerns. Randall Tier was Hannibal's patient. If the FBI do get him, then they may find incriminating information that leads them to the Ripper. If Randall dies unexpectedly, there will be too many questions about his death, and Esther will never get closure.

The best option therefore is for someone trustworthy to join Hannibal and Will in their stroll through the valley of the shadow of death.

The lanky young man stares at Hannibal. "How do I do that?"

"I had a sister once," says Hannibal, watching Matthew's face closely for every minute shift in expression. "I did everything I could to keep her with me. But I was too small and too weak. I could not fight back. Couldn't protect my baby sister."

"I'm not small," says Matthew. "I'll do anything to protect her."

"Good." Hannibal crosses over to Matthew's side of the counter. "She has seen a monster. She has to see it slain. That is the favor I ask of you."

Matthew nods and swallows, his keen eyes bright. A strange tension builds in the room and Hannibal knows that the kindred spirit he first noticed in Matthew has finally come out to scent the air. Hannibal's the apex predator here, and a fledgling killer is learning from the master. It's a powerful moment. Hannibal only wishes Will is here to witness it.
Then Matthew straightens and narrows his eyes. "He has the suit, Dr Lecter."

"It is made of bone. Where bones meet..."

"There are joints." The young man looks thoughtful. "I understand."

"Good," says Hannibal quietly. "Finish your cheesecake, and we shall talk about Will's condition, and then I will drive you home on my way back to the hospital. We have talked of nothing else besides that, and your impending graduation."

"When will the monster come out from under the bed, Dr Lecter?"

Hannibal tilts his head. "When you least expect it. Live your life as you usually do, Matthew. When it comes, it will get what it deserves."

"Dr Lecter," says Matthew, hesitant, the shadow within him retreating into its shell, "why are you doing this?"

Hannibal smiles and quotes Mary Shelley: “We are both monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another.” He then adds, "You will find that there is no one in the world who can understand what drives you better than I do."

"What about Will?"

"I am his, and he is mine." Hannibal allows the possessiveness to flare for a second, enough to warn Matthew off. "He knows me far better than anyone in the world. He is the one who believes in you, Matthew. Don't prove him wrong."

Matthew bobs his head in mild bashfulness. "I know he's always listened to me and trusted me. I won't ever turn on him."

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*****

The next day is one of fatigue and tedium. Hannibal spends most of it in an uncomfortable chair, going through some reading for an article he is writing. The papers are stacked neatly, with post-it notes - he doesn't like them, but there's only so much he can jot down while crammed into an armchair - sticking out of some pages.

In the morning, Will is exhausted after walking to the bathroom and back, even with Hannibal's help. They both examine the incision site, and Will listens to Hannibal talk about the operation. He whines at Hannibal for making him move, but receives only a small kiss for positive reinforcement, and after that endures a lengthy visit from his colleagues. In the afternoon, Jack visits, as do Alana and Beverly; from the latter two they catch up on Winston and Buster.

"I have them at the moment," says Alana. "Don't think Hannibal's up to taking care of two injured dogs and you at the same time."

"Thanks, Alana," says Hannibal. He's almost forgotten about the canines, so wrapped up in Will. "Could I ask you for some advice about a patient?"

He leads her outside the ward. The brunette brushes her hair from her face and narrows her eyes. She's grinning though, and Hannibal supposes he should congratulate her on her perceptiveness in this matter.

"Never seen you worried about a patient before," says Alana slyly. "And never have you asked my advice before."

"In this case the patient is Will Graham," says Hannibal in a low voice, "and the issue I need your advice with is regarding a major decision."

Alana claps her hands to her mouth, her eyes widening.

"You're gonna propose, aren't you?" she squeaks breathlessly. "You are, right??

"Yes." Hannibal thinks she might just explode with glee. "I need you to coordinate it for me."

"When? Where? How?" Alana is bright pink with excitement, looking more a giddy schoolgirl than a respected professor and psychiatrist.

Hannibal lays out the idea for his protege. She swears not to tell anyone, not even Beverly, until the date is nearer. He says, "Not overly lavish, please. Will really isn't one for public

displays."

"Don't you worry," says Alana breezily. "I'll sort it out, but on one condition."

"What condition?"

"I call dibs on being your best woman," she says with a smirk. "I'm your best woman, or else the whole deal's off."

"You've been learning how to bargain from Ms Katz," says Hannibal with a smile. He nods in acquiescence. "You have your... dibs. And now I shall not need to be secretive around Will."

"You'll show me the ring, right?"

"No, Alana, he'll show you the ring when he gets it."

"Darn it." On impulse, Alana hugs Hannibal, and plants a kiss on his cheek. "Okay, I need to go to the ladies and calm down before I go inside. I swear, sometimes it feels like Will can read my mind."

*****

On his way home for dinner, Hannibal goes to a wooded area near Randall's childhood house. The police are combing the park where Will was attacked and staking out his apartment; the psychiatrist has no doubt that Randall is aware of their hunting him. Desperation will force Randall's hand.

He kills the engine, briefly wishing he could snap Randall's neck. In truth, he is absolutely delighted at the transformation. Yet Randall's recklessness is jeopardizing far too much of Hannibal's life and freedom.

"Randall. I know you're here, and you know who I am. Come out." He manages to keep his anger out of his voice.

Instead of a beast, a slender young man sidles out of the shadows of the trees. "Dr Lecter."

"Come here, Randall," says the psychiatrist, as he used to coax Randall from the corners of the office. It is familiar and empathetic; Hannibal had used Randall to perfect his Dr Lecter voice, used to soothe and cajole others. "Let me look at you."

"They're looking for me," says the young man after he trots up to Hannibal, sounding like the confused and scared child that first came to Hannibal's office. Randall is just six years Will's senior, and was one of Hannibal's earliest patients. Even then Hannibal had seen the darkness behind the tears; it has taken so long for it to fully take shape.

Such a shame Randall allowed the beast inside to take over him so fully.

"They are," says Hannibal. "And the girl will be able to identify you when they catch you. She's the only one who can."

"I should've killed her when I had the chance."

"You still do," says Hannibal quietly. "I can give you her address. She thinks you're a monster, a beast from myth and legend. Will you prove her right?"

Randall blinks, and then nods eagerly.

The doctor inclines his head and whispers in his former patient's ear. It's almost too intimate, but Hannibal wants to lock in this memory of an almost-success; he needs this reminder to warn him of hubris. He's suddenly staggeringly grateful that Will is alive - his humanity lies with Will.

He watches Randall put on the suit, and is intrigued by the shift in his entire demeanor. Now there is a slight hunch, a hungry look, and in the darkness, the teeth of the cave bear that Randall has appropriated seem truly deadly. Hannibal has to admit that the suit of bones is *exquisite*. He hopes Matthew doesn't damage it too much.

On his drive home, Hannibal wonders if he should call Matthew, but decides against it. While he trusts Will's judgment, he also harbors his own doubts about Matthew's resolve and capability. Given the right motivations, anyone can be a killer, but not everyone becomes a killer, and certainly not everyone can survive the metamorphosis. If Matthew does live through this, then the doctor will be able to draw out more of the killer in him. It must taste blood first.

Thus far, Will has killed Budge only. All the other times he came along with Hannibal, he has been Hannibal's audience. The doctor wonders if, given the conditions, Will can be further transformed. They have lived together for nearly four years, and Will has his fair share of the same darkness that crawls in Hannibal's veins; Hannibal wants to watch Will give in to that side of himself. Unlike Hannibal, however, Will has a moral code much more in keeping with common morality. Although Will is not averse to watching his older lover slaughter pigs for wasting their lives, he is also determined to select only the most deserving. All the theatrical displays have stopped. Will is the only one Hannibal wants looking at his art, and since he's already there for the performance, there is no need to include others in his private exhibitions.

The Chesapeake Ripper plagues very few now. Jack Crawford, since Bella's death, has become more tenacious, and dogs each case until a culprit is located. In his spare time he studies the old cases, and Hannibal is very well aware that the Ripper is still a ghost lingering in Jack's mind. There will come a day when Hannibal will put his mind at rest - Jack Crawford is, in his own way, a friend - but it will not be too soon.

*****

Hannibal returns to the hospital just before midnight. The nurses on duty thank him for the cupcakes he has made for them, and he slips into Will's ward soundlessly.

The young man is awake though. "Hey."

"Will," says Hannibal. "You should be sleeping."

"I've slept the whole day," Will whines. "Come kiss me."

"Only after you brush your teeth, mongoose. Here." Hannibal helps Will up and lets the latter navigate carefully to the private bathroom. "I also brought you a change of clothes. Let me check the stitches." He's happy with Will's progress, and covers the healing wound with waterproof bandages. "Go on, I'll help you with your shower."

Will is appropriately grateful. Once he's changed and cleaned up, he gets Hannibal to snuggle with him in the narrow bed. "You've spoken with Matthew?"

"He was very concerned about you," says Hannibal.

"He's sweet." Will sighs and breathes Hannibal in. "He sometimes reminds me of you. Particularly when he's looking at Esther, like he'll burn the world to keep her safe."

Hannibal smiles. "Yes, he does."

"Is it tonight?"

"I believe so. I think I will be receiving a phone call in about two hours. In the meantime," says Hannibal, pulling out his phone, "I've put in a few cello concertos. Which would you like first?"

"You have Saint-Saens?"

"Saint-Saens it is." Hannibal kisses Will's cheek, and remarks, "When you return home, I'm going to shave you."

Will smirks. "I think stubble would suit me."

"It may, but if you have stubble I shall grow a beard, and you won't enjoy the risk of beard burn in sensitive regions, mon amour."

"That's blackmail."

"Yes, it is."

"Smugness does not become you, Hannibal."

Hannibal hums with satisfaction. He wonders what Matthew will become. Then, looking at Will, he thinks about all that Will can become, and is surprised to feel a frisson of something akin to fear trickle down his spine.

Potential. So much potential, all in my hands. The psychiatrist trails a finger along Will's cheek, and then presses his lips to Will's brow. *When he grows into his full potential, what will he deliver unto the deserving?*

Chapter End Notes

Saint-Saens Cello Concerto No.1 Op.33 In A Minor

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It is dead silent in the house. Matthew is about to fall asleep, watching the quiet rise and fall of Esther's chest as she breathes. She will never be fully independent, he knows, and in her reliance on him neither will he be free. Family is a two-way burden. It is a restraint he gladly bears, however. He remembers the silent despair in Dr Lecter's eyes when he mentioned his sister. It was only a flicker, but Matthew had not missed it. That would explain why Dr Lecter dotes on Esther - she reminds him of whom he's lost. Matthew never wants himself to have that haunted gaze.

A part of Matthew misses his cat, Meatloaf. Two years ago, it got out and was killed by a dog. They never found out which dog mauled it. Matthew was the one who dug a hole in the narrow backyard and buried his pet, and lied to Esther that Meatloaf had gone on an adventure. He misses the cat's warmth, the way it curled against his belly at night, and how it butted its head against his arm when he was studying.

A cat is a predator, and evolution made it a good one. But there will always be a larger, nastier beast out there.

He is now waiting for one. He has a baseball bat by the door, and he has sketched what he recalls of the suit. Crude renditions, really, but in his head he has run through various scenarios. He doesn't doubt that the crazed man will come. The only person who knows him by his human face is Esther, and they were featured on the news. It's not difficult to track them if the guy truly wanted to kill his witnesses.

But that assumes that the guy is still capable of rational thought. A rational person does not put together a suit made of fossil bones and tries to kill people.

Dr Lecter kills people.

The older man is one of the most reasonable, intelligent persons Matthew has ever met, and Matthew is certain that Dr Lecter is in every way also a predator. He wonders if Will knows, and if he knows, does he care.

There is a crash of glass out in the living room, startling both Matthew and Esther.

"Mattie?"

Matthew leaps to his feet and grabs his bat. "Stay in the room, Esther."

*****

"Violence," murmurs Hannibal, seeing the bashed-in and bloodied head of the late Randall Tier, "does recoil upon the violent."

"Sherlock Holmes," Zeller who overhears the doctor identifies the source breezily. Long inured to the doctor's stoicism in the face of brutality - who among those who face the aftermath of death doesn't have their own coping strategies? - Zeller adds, "Quite the carnage. Your boyfriend's friend really whaled on him with his baseball bat."

Carnage was the right word. Or perhaps 'pulp'. For all his lankiness, Matthew is remarkably strong. Perhaps he was fueled by more than mere strength. Even Hannibal cannot predict what a person is capable of under times of great duress. He himself was an example of that, and Will another.

"Where is Matthew?" Hannibal asks him. "And his sister?"

"In his bedroom, first on the left."

Hannibal takes one more lingering look at Randall, at the broken body lying on the faded carpet in the living room, and spares a faint second of regret that things had to end this way. He heads into Matthew's bedroom, with a nod at the policeman on duty at the door, speaking with Mrs Brown. Inside, he finds Esther staring in wide-eyed wonder at her brother, who is being treated for a few scrapes and cuts by a rather fetching paramedic. When they notice Hannibal, the paramedic smiles and exits gracefully.

Matthew has bloodied knuckles and a shallow cut along his neck; his eyes are blazing with life. "Dr Lecter."

"How do you feel?"

"Safe," says the young man, his gaze falling on Esther. Then he looks at Hannibal directly. "Free of fear."

Unaware of the electric undercurrent of understanding between the two men, Esther pipes up, "The monster burst in and wanted to eat me, but Matthew fought it off!"

"He's very brave, isn't he?" says Hannibal in a light tone.

"He is!" Esther sounds awed.

"And now the monster is gone," says Matthew with a small smile. "You can sleep easy now."

"Will you kill all the monsters, like in the story about the Minotaur and Theseus?"

Matthew sighs and kisses the crown of his sister's head. "I will be like Theseus, yes."

Mrs Brown comes into the room after her statement is taken, and Hannibal excuses himself. Once outside, he is accosted by Jack Crawford. The thickset man does not ask about Randall immediately, to Hannibal's surprise. "How is Will?"

"He's fine," says Hannibal. "He's already walking about, very slowly, but he will recover in a month or so. it was lucky Randall Tier did not injure him more grievously than he could have."

The two men look over at the corpse. Hannibal frowns as one slim young woman with long blonde hair bends over it, shifting the shattered fossil jaw about. Jack sees the look and says, "She's the newest of the team. Miriam Lass."

"I look forward to working with her in the future then," says Hannibal. He will need to get to know her, suss her out for her weaknesses. The fact that he has one foot in the FBI allows him a great deal of leeway to influence the investigation on Ripper cases, now classed as 'The One that Got Away'; Hannibal believes that Jack will throw this young lady at the cases again, check out what has been overlooked. Fresh eyes and all that. Jack is as tenacious as a bulldog.

"She sent me some of her assignments on crime scene analysis when she was still a student. Compelling reading," says Jack. He does not elaborate further.

Miriam Lass seems to have overheard their conversation. She looks up, nods at her boss and then at the psychiatrist, and turns her attention to the broken window. "How did Randall Tier get this address?" she mused aloud.

"Matthew and Esther were on the evening news yesterday," Price interjects helpfully, "and they were interviewed on this street. Shouldn't be too hard to find out details, especially since he can just walk around without the suit to find out what he needs to know."

"It's possible," Zeller concedes. "In any case, he's dead."

"Good riddance," Jack mutters under his breath. He catches Hannibal's regard and his lips twitch. "Unprofessional, yes, but the sentiment stands regardless."

Hannibal inclines his head slightly. "Perhaps they could spend the night in a hotel after their statements are taken. Does Matthew need to be further questioned?"

Jack glances over at the officers on interview duty. They nod at him, evidently some sort of signal, and Jack frowns. "They're done."

"I'll take them myself," says Hannibal. "There are reporters outside; no need to fuel the frenzy for the whole family to be shepherded into a squad car."

"I'll have Miriam go over to sort out payment issues later when we're done here." Jack also offers the few options that the FBI will reimburse, so Hannibal picks the closest and ushers the Brown family into his Bentley.

*****

The ride to the hotel is defiantly, ridiculously calm. Matthew is surprised. He should be buzzing with adrenaline, but all his senses feel muted. Esther is lying sprawled over the backseat, her head on her mother's lap; Mrs Brown is staring out the window, lost in her thoughts.

"Matthew," says Dr Lecter when they have checked in, "when Will is home, I'd like you to come for dinner."

"Thank you," says Matthew. He knows now that an invitation to Dr Lecter's table is an honor. The quiet sense of power that suffused him earlier has faded to a ghost of a memory, but it's still very much present.

Dr Lecter touches his wrist discreetly. "Do not follow your thoughts inward, Matthew. Focus on being you, doing what you are supposed to do. We will see you next Tuesday at seven." There is a glimmer of pride in his gaze as he looks at the young man, almost paternal. "Rest well, Matthew."

*****

The monstrous shape in the living room that resolved itself into something recognizable. The shattered window, the glass glittering madly on the carpet, over Esther's toy chest. The heaving breaths of a man pretending to be a creature.

The first, satisfying crack of wood against fossilized bone, against joints. He heard the joints give and then they were grappling, Matthew ducking away from teeth that should have remained buried. His arms were scratched up and he felt the fire of pain, but he kicked the man in the groin and then smashed his bat again on the bone skull, shattering the jaw and dragging the man out of his bone suit.

T he frantic struggle. The scream from behind them, the momentary distraction. The impact that jarred all the way up his arms as he cracked the man's head against the floor, and then the look of bewildered fear in the other's eyes. The swing of his bat again and again, the crunch of wood against flesh and bone, the spray of blood, the final choked-out gasp, all while his mother was screaming and screaming.

His sharp command for her to shut up.

Then the wondrous silence punctuated only by his breathing.

And then Esther peeking out to see, and her face upon realizing that the monster haunting her was dead and gone.

A hot shower eases the ache in his bones and stings the cuts on his arms and knuckles. Matthew scrubs his face and stares into the mirror. He should be shocked by the small smile on his face.

He isn't.

There should be a voice somewhere telling him that enjoying this is wrong. His conscience isn't working, apparently. The sheer contentment of having eradicated something - some *thing* - that has terrorized his baby sister has wiped out every other consideration. He'll do it again if Esther is in danger, and this time he'll do it with his bare hands. Feel life slipping away from under his fingers.

It's a terrifyingly freeing realization, however, to be able to look in the mirror and see nothing has changed about him. He's still Matthew Brown. He sees the muscles of his torso and arms, built from hours of swimming and carrying heavy things, from carrying bodies and patients

around. He can still imagine the first tattoo that he'll get after he graduates. It'll be on his left pectoral. Esther already picked it out: it's going to be Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. No lines. Esther wants to trace them with eyeliner pencil (it's a recommendation from Matthew's classmate after he turned up with sharpie on his forearm) and he will let her.

For the moment, he feels indebted to Dr Lecter, and wonders if he's meant to feel indebted. The ease with which the older man suggested killing another human being suggests an arrogance, a sense of superiority to other people. Matthew isn't used to reading people - he likes being left to his own devices - but he cannot wipe away the image of the tiny gleam of pride in Dr Lecter's eyes.

He doesn't know if Will knows that his boyfriend is a dangerous man, and what it says about Will should he be completely aware of what Dr Lecter is. There are many secrets here that MAtthew is finally starting to catch glimpses of. He suspects that he's being allowed a peek behind the curtains, though for what reason, he cannot begin to guess.

In so many ways, the couple is a mystery to Matthew, for all that he and Will spend an inordinate amount of time together, and Will confides in him frequently. He doesn't know why they are together, why they have remained together, why they still look at each other as though they have just fallen in love every single time. He's envious of their bond. Regardless of what they are, they are definitely in love.

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On Monday, the hospital releases Will Graham into the care of his physician, primarily because Will is sick of the bland liquid diet. Hannibal is more than eager to have his lover home with him. He is going to resume practice only a week later, so that gives them a week's reprieve from duty and the outside world.

Will wants to kiss the floor the second he steps through the door. Given how clean Hannibal maintains their home, Will could probably eat dinner off of the flooring, but that probably would be rude. He walks into the kitchen, still slightly stiff around the middle, and hears the excited barking in the backyard. "Alana's already brought the dogs home?"

Hannibal smiles fondly. "They've missed you, mon amour."

"I miss them too," says Will, and heads to the patio door. He commands them to sit, and waits until they do before he goes into the backyard. Winston remains sitting, tongue lolling from his mouth and his tail wagging happily, but Buster forgets his training and starts jumping about Will's ankles. Hannibal is about to step in and run interference when Will clicks his tongue.

"Sit," Will orders again, tapping Buster slightly with his foot. The mutt settles down, and Will crouches down slowly to scratch behind both their ears. "Good boys. You missed me, didn't you?"

*****

Hannibal watches Will with the dogs, and his heart feels overfull again. He's already accepted that with Will in his life, he feels far more human than he used to be, along with all the messy emotions that being human entails.

Will is back home with his beloved dogs, crouching in the grass, bathed by the sun's rays. It is a lovely image, but Hannibal wonders if his lover still belongs in the light. He is assured of Will's love, but he isn't certain of his motivations, and that is plaguing Hannibal. Ever since he set Randall to be killed by Matthew, dark suspicions have swirled in Hannibal's head, threading and twisting like smoke, filling the hours of his solitude with doubt. The psychiatrist is aware that Will has a darkness within him; over the years, they have been complicit in Hannibal's crimes, and not once has Will flinched.

He should mourn the loss of the Will Graham before the basement was discovered. Yet Hannibal considers it a worthwhile trade-off: blissful ignorance in exchange for complete acceptance and love.

And in his love, he has perhaps set free the fetters of too black a shadow. Perhaps this was how Frankenstein felt when his creation first drew breath.

But Frankenstein never loved his creature. Hannibal is hopelessly devoted to his Will, as hopelessly as he had been to Mischa, and never again to another being. Will has changed him irredeemably and irrevocably. To revert to what he was would take an undoing of skeins wound into every sinew, an exhalation of every breath in his soul. It is impossible to extract Will Graham's influence on him as it is to extract Hannibal Lecter's influence on Will.

They have adapted to each other, evolved together, and become one unit. Hannibal executes Will's judgment; Will admires Hannibal's artistry. They may play at being a normal couple for the world, yet they are anything but.

They are wolves playing at sheep.

If Bedelia is around, she might say Hannibal's fostered the perfect partner for himself: dangerously codependent on each other, Will as Hannibal's heart, Hannibal as Will's mind.

Is that not sufficient? What does Will want Matthew to be to him?

"Who are you?" Hannibal whispers.

"What?" Will turns around and grins broadly. He looks young, as though the four intervening years have not touched him. "Hannibal, are you alright? You look like you're about to fall over."

"I'm all right."

The young man stands up slowly with a faint grimace, and takes Hannibal's hand. "Are you sure?"

"Come. Let us shower and to bed, my love, and let me love you," he says in French.

"You have my love," Will replies, also in flawless French. He squeezes his lover's hand, and somehow that reassures Hannibal that, at the very least, Matthew Brown is not going to usurp his place by Will's side.

*****

Hannibal exudes control and incredibly restrained power in everything he does, so Will is surprised when the older man is tentative about touching him as they start kissing again. Obviously they have to lay off their more frenetic sessions, something which Will is already missing, but this seems vastly different even from their usual slow lovemaking. There is a painful tenderness to the manner in which Hannibal kisses him and lays him out on emerald-green sheets, as though the doctor is afraid that Will is going to shatter.

"I'm not a teacup, Hannibal," says Will.

Hannibal pauses in the middle of a reverent kiss to Will's knee. "No, you're not. You're much more valuable." He resumes tracing his mouth down Will's lean legs, tasting salt and clean skin. With each phrase, he presses a kiss to his lover. "You are my *washi.* You are strong, and graceful, and noble. You are unique." He levers himself to lie between Will's legs, with the younger man's thighs resting on his broad shoulders. "You are mine, as I am yours."

Will smiles down at the doctor, and then lets his head fall back as Hannibal savors and drinks him in. There is only the sound of breathing and wet tongue on skin, interjected with the occasional soft moans that Will cannot withhold. The older man laps and sucks leisurely, allowing Will to slowly crest towards his climax, and then swallows him down as he comes with a sharp intake of breath.

After Will drifts down from his high, Hannibal drapes himself next to Will and plays his hand through dark curls while they kiss languidly. It's a different sort of pleasure to be had for the next few weeks, Will thinks. He gets to be selfish and just enjoy Hannibal's mouth and hands, without needing to reciprocate. He mentally calculates the time he will need to recover enough for more vigorous sex.

The ring sits heavy on his mind - every morning, for the past week, he wakes to see Hannibal by his bed; some nights the older man doesn't return home. He sees the tension in Hannibal's neck and shoulders, sees the slight wince when he stretches out his back, sees the unadorned love that shines from the eyes of his cannibal serial murderer.

He wants to propose right now. But if he does, he can't have post-proposal crazy wild sex, which would be a shame, because Hannibal letting go of his control is *mind-blowingly hot*.

He plays with the silvery strands of Hannibal's fringe. The older man exhales heavily through his nose - he doesn't really mind the age gap between them, but he does not appreciate being reminded that he's much older than Will.

Hannibal belongs to sunsets, Will thinks in the hazy aftermath of climax. Sunsets and gold and silver and all things precious.

"Penny for your thoughts," Hannibal says, tracing a finger over the younger man's bottom lip.

"Just wondering how long before we can get to fuck properly," Will answers, his lips in a teasing curve. Hannibal still doesn't like it when Will swears, but honestly, swearing helps when a piano just refuses to hit the right note. "Not that I mind what we just did, but I want it to be good for you too."

Hannibal huffs in mild amusement. "Two months before I am willing to try anything more energetic with you, mon rêve. I will not risk aggravating your wounds."

Will sighs and shifts closer cautiously. Hannibal tucks Will under his chin. They lie together, feeling the warmth of each other seep into their own veins. The hospital bed was too small for proper cuddling. Will has felt severely deprived.

*****

Dinner is a simple affair. Hannibal has steamed fish in the Cantonese style, and serves up double-boiled herbal soup. Will doesn't really like the medicinal taste of these soups, but Hannibal is a firm believer in the healing effects of traditional herbs.

At least Will gets to have lemon sorbet after the meal. They opt to have dessert in the kitchen instead of at the table. He licks it off the spoon greedily, knowing that Hannibal is watching his tongue flicking over the metal utensil. He casts a sly glance at the psychiatrist, and is rewarded with a slight tilt of Hannibal's head. They communicate wonderfully without words, and Will thinks it is a testament to how in sync they are with each other.

Instead of having lemon sorbet, Hannibal is sipping at a millet wine that one of his former colleagues brought back from Taiwan. Will likes its sour-sweetness, and that its low alcohol level gives him only a mild buzz. Hannibal appreciates the health benefits of the wine, though he claims it pales in comparison to good sake, but whenever he cooks Chinese meals, he'll pair it with millet wine.

It's a very domestic moment.

Will hums Miles Davis under his breath, even as Sibelius plays through the speakers. He misses this sort of quiet moments, when they are just together in a space, keenly aware of the other person and yet not needing to make contact. He finishes the sorbet and cleans the dish, and sees Winston peering in through the patio door. The poor darling was scratched up and had a leg broken, but even so Hannibal refuses to let the dogs in, reasoning that all of Will's training will be for naught if they do relax the rules.

"How did Matthew kill Randall Tier?" he suddenly asks. "You never told me."

"You can ask him yourself tomorrow when he comes to dinner."

"Kinda a hard topic to bring up, isn't it? 'Hi Matthew. You look good. So how did it feel to kill someone?'" Will makes a face.

"Not exactly the most ideal dinner conversation topic, it is true."

Will kisses the underside of Hannibal's jaw. "And yet I really want to know how he felt. If it was the same as when I killed Mr Budge. That quiet sense of power just draped around you."

"You had nightmares for weeks after that."

"I had disturbing dreams," Will corrects him absently. "I wasn't afraid, not of him."

Hannibal leans his hip against the counter. "Disturbing in what way?"

"Hannibal, it's been years-"

"-and you remember them very well," says Hannibal swiftly. "Don't lie to me."

Will sighs and wishes he has a beverage to hide behind. He stands closer to Hannibal and whispers, "I do. I don't want to talk about it. Suffice to say, killing Mr Budge emphasized just how important you are to me."

*****

"That first night, you were coming to my room. Do you remember?"

Will chuckles, a low and sinful sound. "I was half-wishing to just go in and let you hold me while I slept."

"My first kill kept me up for a few nights too." Hannibal stills and considers his next move. Then he murmurs, "Why did you want him to do it?"

"Because Randall Tier scared Esther."

"No, that isn't the real reason, Will. Don't lie to me." He hears Will's soft exhalation, and tightens his grip. "It could have been me, or the FBI. Why Matthew?"

When Will's answer finally emerges, it is nothing that Hannibal expects. "Because I trust him."

"And you don't trust me?"

"It's not that," says Will. He leans back, away from Hannibal, and peers into the doctor's maroon eyes. "Hannibal, I love you, but sometimes you scare me with... with how impetuous you can be."

Hannibal scoffs. "I am far from impetuous."

"How many Randall Tiers are out there? Someone will start connecting the dots. Freddie Lounds was connecting the dots before she died. Someone someday will *see*, and then I will lose you." Will withdraws from Hannibal's embrace and heads to the leather chair in the corner of the kitchen. "Someday, either of us could be careless, or maybe someone sees us, or maybe an act of God causes our car to break down right next to a body, or insight strikes someone who's still investigating the old Ripper case. Anything could happen. And I *will* lose you. And I don't - I'm scared. I'm fucking terrified, okay? I've tried ignoring it, but I can't.

The longer we stay together, the more I love you, the more I'm afraid that this - all this - will end."

"And you want me to stop killing? Is that it?"

"You would never do that," says Will. "That is your nature. To deny that... to deny that is to deny an essential part of you. Love alters not what it alteration finds."

"I understand where your concerns come from." Hannibal puts down his wine and goes to Will, crouching in front of him and taking the young man's cold hands in his own. "I don't see how Matthew Brown fits into this."

"If," says Will slowly, "if you are ever captured, my alibi won't stand. Not with our relationship."

"Matthew is hardly an alibi to be relied on."

"No, not an alibi." Will licks his lips. "He's insurance. If you are caught, then he can exonerate you by a Ripper kill. He's used to being ignored by most people. He's intelligent and strong. He owes us so much. He is the perfect choice."

Hannibal stares at Will. This is not the same young man he fell in love with. Seventeen-year-old Will Graham was innocent, loving and protective. This young man before him is a dangerously possessive creature. A strange thrill echoes in Hannibal's bones. How much of this is Will himself, and how much of this is what he's gleaned and absorbed from Hannibal's character?

Empathetic, sweet Will, sharp teeth usually hidden behind a facade of softness, now uncoiling himself to reveal how bloody his fangs are willing to get.

"You want him to sacrifice his innocence for us?" Hannibal asks. "A killer is not the same as a murderer, Will. Randall he killed to protect Esther. A murderer, on the other hand, kills with intent. You are a killer, and Matthew is one too. I am a murderer."

"He will develop a taste for it, I swear," Will promises. His blue eyes flare with purpose. "You have chosen certain people to influence, based on their potential for darkness. I know you, Hannibal, I know how that clinical psychiatric mind dissects your patients to find the fledgling monsters within."

"As you have been spread open for me."

"Yes," Will breathes. "I know you've seen the same potential in him - he's the only one of all my friends you bother to interact with frequently, and I know I'm not wrong about how he looks at you. He will be our insurance."

Hannibal smiles and shakes his head ruefully. "All this work to drag him into darkness, for something that is unlikely to happen."

"Unlikely but possible. Yes, Hannibal Lecter, I will drag him into the abyss where we live and play unafraid. He has our love, for him and for his sister. He has few other friends. He

will fall, whether he intends to or not, so we can guide his fall and help him become so much more than the pigs that surround us."

"Someday," Hannibal mouths against Will's lips, "you will end up killing me to ensure I remain with you forever."

Will laughs quietly. "You've already imagined me dead in so many ways, my dear doctor, served up to you in so many exquisite dishes. I bet you'll save my heart for last."

"You know me too well." Hannibal noses at Will's throat and licks up the expanse of skin. "All right, mongoose. What diabolical plan have you come up with?"

"Let him think himself your protege." Tired from explaining, Will drapes his arms over Hannibal's shoulders. His eyes are fluttering shut, and his voice drops to a low purr. "I want him to become the next Chesapeake Ripper."

"As you wish."

Chapter End Notes

About Washi
Sibelius Violin Concerto in D Minor
Miles Davis - So What

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Instead of dinner, Matthew and Esther visit on Tuesday afternoon. They are greeted by Dr Lecter at the door and led to the study, Esther clinging onto her brother's left hand with a surprisingly sturdy grip.

Will looks better than the last time Matthew saw him, but that isn't saying much. He's reclining on the chaise longue with a tall glass of orange juice next to him. Still, his smile is bright. "Hey Matthew. Hi Esther, sweetie."

"Hey, Will," says Matthew, his throat suddenly tight. He's not prepared for how relieved he is to see Will, and his control falters slightly. He could have lost his best friend forever. Before he can say more, Esther pulls free from his hand and runs over to Will to hug him, but Dr Lecter intercepts her neatly.

"Not yet, sweetheart," says Will apologetically. He places a hand on his lower belly. "No hugs yet. I'm still in pain."

Dr Lecter ruffles Esther's brown hair. "If you hug him, he'll hurt."

Esther bites her lower lip, chastened. "Sorry, Will."

"Here." Will gives her a hug around her shoulders, wincing slightly when he unbends. "That's okay for me."

"Why don't we make some sandwiches, Esther?" suggests Dr Lecter. "I could use your help."

It's obvious that the psychiatrist wants to give the two young men some time and privacy, so Matthew just nods for Esther to follow Dr Lecter out of the study, and then takes a seat beside Will. It's warm here, because it's where the sunlight pours into the study, and Will is pink-cheeked with the heat.

Matthew isn't certain how to proceed. His fingers link together and rub over his knuckles; there's a small cut on his little finger, just under the second knuckle, and he suddenly feels the weight of the bat and the impacts that jar his palms again, a flash of lightning and blood across the expanse of his imagination.

"How's Esther?" Will asks. A safe topic.

Matthew smiles fondly. "She's stopped having nightmares. She's taken to reading Greek mythology again, you know that book Dr Lecter gave her last Christmas?"

"That's good." Will shuffles closer and covers Matthew's joined hands with his own.

For someone just out of hospital, Will's hand is very warm. It would be worrying but Matthew knows that Will is in the best of care with Dr Lecter watching over him. He's thankful for it. "Yes. *She's* recovering."

He didn't mean for that to come out so resentful. Will, being how he is, picks up the subtleties immediately.

"How about you? Are you okay? Hannibal told me about... about how you protected your family."

In his friend's tender concern, Matthew cannot hide his emotions. "Not good. Her dreams have... have come to me." With a sound that's half-groan, half-sob, he buries his face in his hands, yanking away from Will's touch. "I keep reliving that n-ight, and every time I... Each time I kill him, and in different ways, and he comes back again and again, *every night*-"

He feels Will squeeze his knee. "How do all these dreams feel?"

Matthew swallows painfully. He's not sure he should tell Will, but there is no one else in his life that he can confide in. A sad commentary on the state of his life, really. And if he were in a brighter state of mind, he'd tease Will for the obvious adaptation of his boyfriend's psychiatrist mannerisms.

"They feel real." Matthew breathes into his palms and runs them down his face. "I feel... I feel like I do it every night, and each time it feels - *right* - to end him."

"I haven't really told anyone but, um. I-I've killed a man before," Will confesses under his breath. When Matthew glances over, he's caught by Will's storm-blue gaze. "He was my former boss. He, um... he attacked Hannibal in his office and I-I killed him. Bashed him in the head. With a small statue. I couldn't... couldn't sleep properly for weeks."

Something loosens in Matthew's chest. His lips twitch faintly. "Were you and Dr Lecter already-"

"No, not yet, this was before. I, uh, I started realizing my feelings not long after that," says Will, his cheeks flushed. "But yeah, I understand that bit about dreams. I kept seeing Budge get up after I'd hit him and he'll kill... He'd kill Hannibal, right in front of me. And I could do nothing about it. So I'll do it again, sometimes with a gun or a knife or with a rope or my hands. Anything. I remember... I remember waking up scared that I hadn't saved Hannibal. And each time I closed my eyes, I killed him again. I felt powerful. Strong."

Matthew manages a weak smile. "Like you made a difference."

"Yeah," Will agrees.

"When I... when I killed him," says Matthew, gripping his friend's hand now to give himself courage, "it felt so good. Not just - not just because I knew he'll never touch Esther again, but all he could see was me. I was the only one important in his world, for that few fleeting seconds."

It's an odd moment for a confession, with the sunlight streaming in over them, Will in his long-sleeved v-neck dark blue tee and faded jeans, Matthew in his Megadeth tee shirt. They are supposed to be young men shooting the breeze about their partners and their futures and maybe talk shit about someone they know and dislike. Instead they are having a conversation about how good it felt to kill another human being. For the first time, Matthew begins to see that Will understands him precisely because they are almost equally fucked up in the head.

"You were." The corner of Will's mouth lifts slightly. "You have always been, for Esther. You are her world."

Matthew smiles broadly at that and nods. "Yeah. She's mine, too." Then his voice drops to a murmur, and doubt creeps into his eyes again. "But the whole... I'm used to being ignored or f-forgotten. So having that sort of attention just... I don't know. I'm not... Am I crazy? For liking - for enjoying that moment?"

"You're not crazy," says Will vehemently. "They just don't understand you. Or me. I was the poor freak of my school, remember? They ignored my existence until they wanted to torment me. To be seen... to be seen and acknowledged for being who we are is important."

"At the expense of their lives."

Will exhales heavily. "Did they deserve to live? They threatened the people we love. People who love us. See us."

It's as though Will is helping that insistently cruel voice in Matthew's head to form words. Matthew stares at his best friend. "Has he always seen you?"

Will blushes again. He pulls his hands away and fiddles with the hem of his over-large sweater. "Right from the start Hannibal looked at me like I had importance. That I deserved consideration and, and concern, and good things. That I mattered. I'd begun to believe I didn't."

"You matter, Will. You listened to me when no one else but Esther cared," Matthew says quietly, only half aware of what he's actually saying. "You protected me when you could and you've given me so much. You try to understand me when no one bothered."

"You're my best friend." Will's eyes seem impossibly blue suddenly. "I've received just as much from you, Mattie. You matter to me."

"Will, you-" Matthew pauses, and leans forward on impulse to brush his lips over Will's soft mouth.

Will jerks back as though electrocuted. He yanks his hand from Matthew and touches his fingers to his lips, as though confirming what just happened. His tongue flicks over his lower lip, and then he averts his eyes.

"God, I'm sorry," Matthew blurts out. "I d-didn't mean to, I was caught up in the moment-"

The door to the study opens and Esther comes in with a tray of tea sandwiches. She's intent on carrying the tray perfectly and so misses the expressions on the two young men's faces.

"Hannibal taught me to make ham, brie and apple finger sandwiches," she announces brightly. "Hannibal assures me that there's no finger in them."

Matthew feels a surge of panic, knowing that Dr Lecter will come to them soon, and quickly gets to his feet to help pull over an ottoman for use as a makeshift table. At least in motion he's able to push aside the abrupt burst of affection that prompted him to make a move on his best friend.

What the hell was he *thinking?* He knows, he *knows* that Will is happily in love with Dr Lecter, and is even planning to propose. He's going to be Will's best man, for fuck's sake.

It has to be because Will understands him, empathizes with him. He doesn't have anyone who accepts him the way Will does, even knowing now that Matthew isn't right in the head.

"That's good to know," Will tells Esther gravely, avoiding Matthew for the moment. Matthew doesn't blame him.

*****

The first thing Hannibal notices on returning to the study is how assiduously the two young men avoid his gaze.

"Could you go to the kitchen and get a dish towel, Esther?" Hannibal asks with a tiny smile.

There's a tightness about Will's lips that betrays something akin to amusement once Esther leaves. His lashes flick up and blue meets maroon for that split second, before Will averts his eyes again. He takes another sip of his orange juice and pretends he doesn't know that Hannibal knows something is up.

Once the girl is out of the study, Hannibal says, "Tell me what just happened between the two of you."

"Nothing," both young men chorused simultaneously.

"I *am* a psychiatrist," says Hannibal calmly. "Do not lie to me."

Will puts down his drink. "Nothing happ-"

"I kissed Will," Matthew cuts in, red-faced and ashamed. His large hands clasp about his own wrists and twists. "I-I-I kissed him. I'm sorry. It won't ever happen again."

The doctor looks at his boyfriend. He is surprised at the extent of his rage - he does not enjoy the acrid taste that spread over the back of his tongue. "Will?"

"We were talking and I guess it got kinda... personal." Will peers up at his lover, a dark humor swimming in the depths of his eyes, and smiles mock-apologetically. A meticulous performance for Matthew's benefit. "Sorry."

Esther returns with the dish towel and Hannibal sets it under the tray of sandwiches, ostensibly to catch stray crumbs. His actions are extremely measured, which should indicate to his lover just how furious he is.

Will reaches over and touches Hannibal's shoulder, aware that he has let his game go just a touch too far. "Hannibal. We're really sorry."

The doctor makes himself smile politely, and the rest of the light lunch continues without further comment. Every move he makes is calculated and controlled. Hannibal is intrigued by his own anger and, even as they talk about Matthew's upcoming graduation and his intention to work in the psychiatric unit of the hospital, the doctor has pinned the unexpected emotion under the microscope of his mind, examining its causes.

After the meal, Will helps Hannibal to clear the tray and glasses, under the guise that he needs to move about regularly. In the kitchen, Will asks, "How mad are you?"

To keep their guests from overhearing should they venture out of the study, Hannibal lapses into French.

"He is the only other man who has ever kissed your lips, Will," he says. His tone is even and calm. "He is alive and whole now only by dint of the fact that he is your best friend, and Esther is here."

"Hannibal, he didn't mean to.."

"You can read him, Will, you would have stopped him."

"I did. It was barely a touch." Will comes up to Hannibal and presses his face against his older lover's. "Don't kill him."

*****

Hannibal breathes out. Will sees the tension unwind from the older man's shoulders.

"Tu priklausai man, Will," Hannibal says softly. *You belong to me.*

Will brushes his curls from his forehead and draws close to his lover. His lips brush Hannibal's as he murmurs, "Aš priklausau tau." *I belong to you.*

Then he smirks, and adds in French, "He is ours too, Hannibal. This mistake will tie him closer to me and he will defer even more to you."

"You are determined to continue in this course of action."

"The first step has been taken," Will says. He goes to the fridge and digs out four apples for slicing. "Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go."

Hannibal passes him a plate for the apple slices. "I highly doubt T.S. Eliot had you and your plans in mind, mano tamsa."

"What's that mean?"

"My darkness."

Will has to laugh at that, and then puts down his knife to give Hannibal a proper kiss.

*****

When Will takes Esther out to the backyard to check on the dogs, Matthew finds himself unaccountably nervous being left with Dr Lecter.

"I know you didn't mean to kiss him," says the doctor quietly as they watched the other two pet and fuss over Winston and Buster. "But I am terribly angry about it."

"I don't... I'm not looking to steal him, Dr Lecter. Sir."

Dr Lecter doesn't react to the change in title, which in its own way is a response. "Understand that I will not allow an infraction a second time. Will is mine. Touch him inappropriately once more, and I will personally see to your punishment."

"Yes sir." Matthew knows the warning is a death threat. He senses danger emanating from the very stillness of the psychiatrist beside him.

"Did it feel good, to kill Randall Tier?" asks Dr Lecter, while Buster limps out to roll over in the grass.

The segue is appreciated, even if the topic isn't welcome. Matthew clenches his teeth and he nods tightly.

Dr Lecter hums. "You used a bat. Are you going to keep it?"

"Should I?"

"Do you want to?"

Matthew has the odd feeling that he's being tested. He decides that honesty is the only way to go with Dr Lecter. As the man said, he's a skilled psychiatrist. "I want to, but I shan't. I don't need the reminder."

"Because the reminder is in your head."

"Did... did Will tell you? While you were in the kitchen."

Dr Lecter shakes his head minutely. "You are not the only killer present, Matthew. Esther is the only innocent. Take care to retain that innocence; it is a precious thing to exist in this world."

Matthew's curiosity is piqued, but hes not sure if he is allowed to ask for details. He's being assessed for something, and for some reason he desperately wants to be found worthy.

Dr Lecter sees his fidgeting. "Will trusts you with absolute certainty. He asks that I do the same. While I do believe you are trustworthy and reliable to a degree, I cannot bring myself to be too honest with you yet. It is of no fault of yours, but my own limitation. I've been disappointed in people before."

"Have you ever been disappointed in Will?"

"He has been disappointed in me," says Dr Lecter, a strange undertone of amusement coloring his words. "And he will be *very* disappointed in me should I carve off your lips for touching his."

Matthew startles himself by laughing. When he glances over at Dr Lecter, he sees that the doctor's eyes have curved into that vaguely reptilian smirk that barely hints at what lies beneath. The younger man clears his throat, but his broad grin remains.

He straightens and stuffs his hands in his pockets. "Good to know where I stand with you, sir. And I will earn your trust."

"Good to know that you stand with me at all." Dr Lecter places his hands behind him, his dark gaze fixed on Will Graham.

*****

That night, Will wishes he were better just so Hannibal can fuck him properly. Still, this is nice - they are in the shower and Hannibal is cleaning him with care - and the easy intimacy makes Will feel cherished.

"Penny for your thoughts, mon amour," says Hannibal, turning off the shower and reaching out for Will's towel.

Will lets Hannibal wrap him up and then kisses the older man on the nose. "Sometimes I wonder what I'm thinking too."

He walks out into the bedroom and dries himself off. The sutures on his belly aren't bothering him much - they'll dissolve in time, and Hannibal has been obsessively checking them over. His wounds will leave some scars, but having dealt with them himself, Hannibal isn't quite as upset as Will thought he could have been.

When Hannibal joins him in bed, Will snuggles up and rests his head on Hannibal's shoulder. "What do you think of Matthew?"

"I think you don't truly know what you want of him," says the older man, his lips on Will's brow. "You claim he is your best friend, you allow him his momentary lapse of judgment, you want him to become my acolyte, and eventually my successor. None of these roles can keep him the way he is, Will."

"I don't need him the way he is. I need him to become what we need him to be."

"He may be a killer, and there is a similarity between him and me, but he is no murderer," Hannibal informs Will.

Will drapes his arm over Hannibal's abdomen and pinches lightly at the faint softness there. "It's a step closer than he was last month."

Hannibal sighs. "I cannot dissuade you?"

"I want a safeguard in place," says Will obstinately. "I'm afraid of losing you. We've pushed our luck too often, Hannibal."

"I can stop."

"You can, and you'll grow to resent me for it. You've already cut back, and you've retired the Ripper. Yet we both know Jack hasn't let the Ripper go, not since Mrs Crawford passed away. Someone will go over the files and find out."

The psychiatrist ducks his head and kisses Will, his tongue gently sliding into Will's hot mouth and across his hard palate. When Hannibal moves apart from Will, he murmurs, "I won't push him yet. He must move past the guilt first, and that, mon amour, you have to do."

The cunning smile that curves Will's lips should not be as alluring as it is. "That I can do."

He crawls over Hannibal's lap and loops his arms around the older man's neck. They share a few languid kisses, lips skating over each other's mouths and jaws, and then Will nips viciously on Hannibal's lower lip, drawing blood. From Hannibal's answering snarl, Will knows he's roused. Too bad he's not well enough for sex yet.

"Now tell me." Will whispers, "how you threatened him. Every word, Hannibal."

*****

*****

A month passes with little incident. Matthew is relieved.

He graduated from nursing school and applied to a few hospices and hospitals. The first to respond was the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, which surprised him. However, the staff there are friendly and united against their arrogant administrator, Dr Chilton, as well as against the craziness that permeates the walls of the gray, fortress-like building. To his own astonishment, Matthew liked it enough to accept a posting there. He feels sane when surrounded by so many other levels of crazy.

Esther celebrated her 12th birthday, and received a small fortune in presents from Dr Lecter. She also had her period for the first time the day after and that would have been traumatic, had Matthew not been home on his day off. That also marked Matthew's first time buying pads - he's afraid that Esther will forget to remove her tampons - and of course that had to be the day he bumped into his crush in nursing school.

Julie Benson was sweet enough to tell him which type to purchase, and got him to stock up. She even went to Matthew's home and took over teaching duties on this aspect of menstruation, her calm, easygoing demeanor making the whole ordeal a lot less stressful for Matthew.

"So you're focusing on psychiatric care," Julie said, accepting a Dr Pepper from Matthew in repayment for the afternoon's assistance. "What's it like?"

"I've just started," he told her, looking into her pretty hazel eyes.

She is in Mount Washington Pediatric Hospital, and works five and a half days a week. They chatted, Matthew mostly listening, and exchanged numbers. When Julie left, Esther asked if she would come back and if Matthew wanted to date her.

The next day, Matthew asked Julie out for coffee on their mutual day off. She accepted without hesitation.

Other than that, Matthew also visited Will a few times during the month, sometimes with Esther, twice without. Dr Lecter returned to his practice after the second week of Will's return home, so on the occasions when Will and Matthew are alone, they go out to a cafe or the dog park. Will asked about Julie because Esther was a blabbermouth, and Matthew asked about Will's plans for his proposal, because he liked seeing Will get all frustrated and flustered.

Sometimes they talked about their past, Will before Hannibal, Matthew before Will.

They never talk about that kiss.

Dr Lecter and Matthew don't talk beyond cordial greetings, but there is a certain understanding between them that Dr Lecter will soon let Matthew know if he's passed the test.

*****

They are just exiting the cinema after catching the latest blockbuster when Will's phone sings out *Für Elise*. He smiles as he fishes his phone out of his bag. "Hey there."

To give his best friend some privacy, Matthew saunters a few paces ahead. Today he's out with Will to watch a movie, and then they're going to help Matthew choose a small present for Julie. They're dating exclusively now, not that he was dating more than one girl before, but she has stopped seeing other guys. She has the sweetest smile he has ever seen and she loves to debate with him over the merits of Slayer versus Megadeth. When he's with her, he never stammers. Even his colleagues have noticed that he lisps less and stands a little taller, behaves a little more confidently.

Will catches up to Matthew, still talking to his boyfriend. "Druid Hill Park? What did you find there?" Then: "Ew. Bees in a human skull? ... No, don't you dare try the honey, that's *disgusting*."

"That's crazy, even for someone who works with crazy," Matthew comments, and Will passes the remark on.

Matthew envies the laughter in Will's eyes. It's not difficult to see that Will is still as enamored with Dr Lecter as he has ever been. It makes Matthew wonder if he'll ever experience something like that for himself. He doubts that, though. Dr Lecter and Will

Graham have been made for each other, complementing each other in a way that seems to blend them into one single being, dangerous and charismatic. Sometimes he looks at them and notices how they hold entire conversations without saying a word.

"Shouldn't the FBI do their own interviewing? Beverly can do it," Will is saying, a small pout on his lips. "Come on, Hannibal. You promised you'd join us for pizza."

Matthew averts his gaze. He is not going to focus on Will's lips.

"You're making up the excuse to skip pizza. I see right through you. Fine, I'll just have to enjoy myself with Matthew." Will winks at his best friend, and then laughs at something Dr Lecter says. "Hannibal, tu ne manges pas mes amis.... Yeah. I love you too, bye."

"How many languages do you speak with Dr Lecter?" Matthew asks.

Will frowns. "English, French, a smattering of Lithuanian because he's Lithuanian, and he sometimes uses Italian, though I'm not good enough at that to follow what he says most of the time. I'm learning."

"You're more educated than most college undergrads."

"That happens when Hannibal's the tutor," says Will. "Come on, pizza. Then something for Julie. You have *got* to let me meet her soon, Matthew, what kind of best friend doesn't show off his girlfriend?"

"The kind that's still not sure how the relationship is g-oing?"

"She'll adore me," says Will blithely. "I've heard that I can be very charming."

Matthew rolls his eyes. "The charm is debatable."

For that, Will elbows Matthew in the ribs, and then says, "No but seriously. You really like her, don't you?"

Feeling a bashful spread of warmth through his chest, Matthew grins. "Yeah. And Esther likes her too, so that's more or less, y'know, cleared on that front. And Julie knows about Esther's condition, so it's um... it's good."

******

As always, Matthew arrives early to pick Julie up near her apartment. The narrow teal box on his thigh feels ridiculously heavy for no reason. It's just a sterling silver bracelet, not yet engraved; he plans to take her to the shop later after dinner. Then they'll go to the comedy club he's heard about from Barney, though he'll make sure they get a seat in the back. Those in the front are picked on, and he isn't sure he can handle that sort of thing yet.

She comes out in a lake blue floral dress and her shiny blonde hair in a loose braid. Matthew can't figure out what she likes about him, but she does, and he tells her that she looks beautiful.

"Thanks, Matt," says Julie, and leans in to kiss Matthew softly. She smells of fruit and flowers, like springtime, and he kisses her again because he can. She beams at him, her slightly crooked nose crinkling. "You went to watch a movie? You smell of popcorn."

"Yeah, with my best friend. And um, here." He passes her the gift. "I hope you like it."

"It's beautiful," she whispers. "Thank you, Matthew, it's lovely."

Matthew smiles widely, and for that moment, thinks that he can be happy with just this.

*****

They don't go to the comedy club after they get the bracelet engraved. Instead, Julie has him drive her home, and then invites him upstairs with a knowing tilt of her head.

He's slightly apprehensive about it. It's been almost five years since he and Megan fucked in her bedroom, and that had been a fumbling attempt on both parties' sides. After that miserable time, neither he nor Megan talked to each other. Since then he's not really gone out with girls. While he and Julie have made out fairly often, he's still nervous about sleeping with her.

Julie isn't nervous about it though. She pulls him into her bedroom and, once she's locked it against her housemates' intrusion, they kiss passionately, her curves soft against him as his hands skate down from her sunny blonde hair, freed from its braid, to the rich swells of her ass beneath the silky fabric of her dress. She moans softly when he pushes her against the door, his erection hard beneath his jeans and his mouth locked on the hollow under her ear. He plays his hand over her soft breasts and she undulates against him, tugging down thin straps for the dress to drop to the floor.

"Your bra is pretty," Matthew says quietly, tracing his fingertips over the lacy edges of her pale green bra.

"Your turn to strip," Julie orders breathlessly.

They take his clothes off together, his shirt unbuttoned quickly and tossed to one side over a chair and his jeans kicked off with alacrity. He allows her to lead him to her bed - it's rather narrow, but he's not complaining - and she straddles his lap.

He presses his mouth and tongue to her neck, eliciting a gasp, and then her collarbones and down to the warm valley between her breasts. They're just the right size for his hands and he kneads them gently, until she unclasps it and pulls it off. Then he closes his mouth over one pert nipple and sucks, slow and intense, drinking in the quiet moans that seem to be drawn up from Julie's abdomen. His tongue circles and teases the nipple until it's a hard nub, and she moans again when he directs the same meticulous attention to the other one.

Her fingernails scrape along his scalp. He shivers with the sensation - he never knew he is sensitive there - and she does it again and again and again, until he is a panting mess atop her on the bed, his lips still on the soft mounds of her breast. When he pushes up on his elbows,

he's gratified to see how her skin is blush pink. Her hair is splayed over her pillow and a few strands over her eyes. He brushes them aside and then suddenly makes a face.

"I wasn't expecting this," he tells her honestly, "and I didn't prepare condoms... Do you have any?"

"Damn, I thought you had some," Julie says with a grimace. She rubs the heel of her palm over the bulge in his boxers and murmurs, "I was hoping to get to know you a lot better tonight."

Matthew bites back a groan and says, "Let me use my hands and, um, my mouth then?"

"You don't mind?" Julie bites her lower lip. "Lots of guys don't really like doing that."

"I've never tried with my mouth," says Matthew, a little bashful. "But, uh, you could teach me what you like...?"

Julie smiles widely, her cheeks darkening further. "Oh yeah."

*****

It's a different sort of intoxication, Matthew discovers. He laps up Julie's secretions happily, and then has the tip probing and prodding at the clitoris as she instructed. She smells musky and delicious down here between her legs, which makes him harder than he has ever been.

She's writhing and moaning freely, her fingers clutching at the sheets and frequently at his head. It's a good thing he's strong because her hips keep moving; there will be bruises on them tomorrow, the way he's holding her. Her thighs are sweaty where they hang over his shoulders; his thumbs dig into the lines of her hips and she cries out. His tongue runs lower, towards her entrance, letting her essence coat his tongue, and he loops his arm around her leg so his thumb can keep rubbing her when he pulls back to take a short breather. His face is smeared and dripping with her juices and she looks nearly wrecked and absolutely breathtaking. His thumb presses and rubs insistently, dragging back and forth over the little button to her pleasure.

She appears to want to say something but before she can frame the words, her mouth falls open and she throws her head back; her heels dig into his back as she wails aloud.

He's pleased by that, and keeps his hand there until she comes again, and soon she's tugging on his wrist to get him to stop for a bit.

"Let me take care of you too," she murmurs, her voice somewhat hoarse.

It's probably because they're nurses, Matthew thinks hazily. They are geared toward taking care of people, to ensuring others' welfare above their own. She uses her hands and mouth skilfully and he focuses on how amazing it feels, the slick wet slide of her tongue and lips, the suction, her hands stroking his shaft. He comes faster than he'd have liked.

She makes a face and spits into the trash bin beside her bed. "A warning next time, Matthew."

"Sorry," he says, slightly stung by her obvious distaste. It feels like a rejection though he knows that not everyone enjoys the taste of bodily fluids. He wonders if Will and Dr Lecter swallow for each other, the thought rising unbidden, and he squashes the curiosity immediately. No need to start thinking of his best friend's sex life.

They kiss slowly, Julie evidently okay with the taste of her enjoyment in Matthew's mouth. When he goes for a shower with a borrowed towel, he sees a post-it stuck on the door.

'Julie u lucky bitch, who's e stud got u screaming? Care 2 share? We're out @ the club 2 get our own.

P.S. Stud, if u r reading this, good job!'

There's a drawing of a smiley face.

He flushes pink, suddenly aware that her friends had been listening to them. It's better than having Esther listen in, he reasons, and goes to take a quick shower. He will need to get home fast since he has a morning shift for the week.

Afterwards, Julie kisses him goodbye, and they promise to text tomorrow. She's going to meet her housemates at the club so he drops her off there, with yet one more lingering kiss, and he goes home feeling almost normal.

Chapter End Notes

We're about to go darker from here on in. Be warned.

On a lighter note, it turns out there's a lot more to write than 12 chapters I originally planned for.
vous n'êtes pas à manger des amis - you're not to eat friends (please correct my French if it's wrong, I rely solely on Google translate)

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Got a new one for your consideration," Will says, handing his phone to Hannibal. It's a photo of an address on an invoice. "Not this one, the neighbor at 36. Played polka music at inhuman volumes while I was trying to tune their piano."

Already settled in his armchair to read the month's issue of American Journal of Psychiatry, Hannibal grimaces in sympathy when he sees how wan Will is. He puts aside the phone and gestures for his boyfriend to sit down. "You don't look so good, Will. Come here."

With a soft groan, Will takes the space on the floor between Hannibal's legs, leaning back against the chair. "My head hurts," he complains, but Haydn's Sinfonia concertante is doing wonders to ease the tension from his shoulders.

"I thought you were supposed to be working on the F.C. Lighte?" Hannibal's strong fingers started massaging Will's temples slowly.

"I am, but Danielle threw up at lunch and it was her appointment, so I took over. Thought - ooh, that feels great - it'd be an easy job, just tuning." Will lets his head droop forward as Hannibal's hands move to behind his ears and down to the back of his neck. "But the F.C. Lighte is turning out marvelously. Whoever gets to have that is going to have a work of art in their house."

"Do you want it?"

"We don't need another piano."

Hannibal plants a soft kiss at the base of Will's spine. The young man smells faintly of sweat, but more of wood, metal and dust, the scents of his workplace, and horrendously sugar-heavy mockeries of coffee. The psychiatrist sighs in defeat and nips at Will's neck in mock scolding.

"Sorry, Hannibal. Couldn't resist the sugar rush." He goes lax and places the entire weight of his head in Hannibal's hands.

Ever since Will discovered his secret, the doctor has marveled at Will's trust. Who else, knowing that Hannibal is a cannibalistic serial killer, would willingly bare their neck and place themselves before him in such a vulnerable position? Will Graham must feel like a god sometimes. He runs his fingers down the side of the young man's neck. The month necessary for recuperation has taken its toll on Will; he lost a fair amount of weight.

Unaware of his lover's thoughts, Will shakes his head minutely, his curls brushing Hannibal's nose. "Sometimes I think you're too good for me."

"I think we have established that I am not a good man, mon amour."

"Neither am I, so it works out just fine," Will whispers, resting his cheek on Hannibal's right hand.

*****

Will arches into the hold, neck bared for Hannibal to suck a bruise into. His hips move in sync with Hannibal's thrusts, his weight resting entirely on the latter as they fuck. Once Hannibal is certain that the damage is mostly repaired, they have been making up for lost time. Already the older man has brought Will to climax twice, with his fingers and a new toy; he's finally entered Will, his cock sliding easily into the younger man who is loose and relaxed from their earlier efforts. His chest rubs over Will's back, following the enticing curve of his spine.

"Needed this so badly today," Will mumbles, tongue thick and lazy with lust, lapping at Hannibal's fingers cupping his jaw. "Hannibal, god, I wish I could do this the whole day..." His legs splay further apart and his hips shove ineffectually up to get Hannibal to move faster.

Hannibal sets his sharp teeth against Will's skin. He loves hearing his lover babble mindlessly when they draw out their lovemaking; there is something deeply intoxicating about the stream of consciousness falling from Will's lips, and after these few years of tuition Will occasionally lapses into French and rudimentary Lithuanian. They fall like pearls and rubies into the mirror-still lake that is Hannibal's mind.

The doctor is keenly aware of every sensory stimulus now: the smell of his Will's musk and semen, the glint of eyes ringed with a mere hint of blue, the damp velvet texture of bare skin rasping over Hannibal's hairier body, the salt-bitter of Will's sweat that clings to Hannibal's tongue. He drowns in the faint mugginess of the air around them; the orange glow from the streetlights that just barely pierces the curtains. The song of Will's moans and exhales, and in the background, barely audible, a symphony of insects punctuated by the occasional vehicle driving past seep into his veins.

It is a cornucopia for the senses, and even Hannibal is spoiled for choice. He has made love to Will countless times over the past four years and each time is a revelation in how much he loves the young man. What started as a collection of curios in the greenhouse in his memory palace has become a room, became a wing, and is now an entirely separate fortified city of memories and sensations. Music pours into the streets, from Debussy and Tchaikovsky to Billie Holiday and Dizzy Gillespie, each tune locked into a specific moment.

Now, sheathed inside his lover, he hears the *taiko* that Lady Murasaki once described to him; its sudden bursts of power that makes the silence between heartbeats louder. He can never hope to express his feelings as freely as Will. Over the decades he has put up too many gates between his heart and his tongue.

Will is murmuring endearments and curses now, wanting to feel more yet too languid to do more then pull halfheartedly on the psychiatrist's arms and scrape his nails over the outside of Hannibal's thigh where he can reach. Hannibal smirks and sinks his teeth into his lover's shoulder; Will has joked that someday the older man will tear off a mouthful and eat Will raw.

The sound Will makes is *decadent*. Hannibal locks his mouth on the bite again and sucks, almost tasting blood on his tongue.

"God, Hannibal, do that again, do that *harder*-"

Hannibal does as requested, perhaps with too much enthusiasm. The thin barrier of skin is breached and Will grunts in pain. With the faint copper-iron taste seeping into his mouth, Hannibal gives himself over to the rapidly thunderous drums of his pulse and he bites down again, surrendering to pleasure.

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Later, after he extracts himself from Hannibal's embrace, Will examines the bite wound on his shoulder in the bathroom. He feels a dark thrill of excitement tingling through his nerves. He presses on the bruise and he has to bite back a whimper; he can feel arousal thrumming in his veins at the visceral reminder of how he managed to urge Hannibal to leave such a blatant and crude mark of possession.

Will is under no illusion that he is the same boy who fell for the sophisticated, caring doctor. He's seen past the mask, sees the honesty of the monster daily and the sincerity of the human veil he puts on, and he loves the entirety of Hannibal - blood-drenched hands and all. Hannibal gifted him the nickname of 'mongoose', and Will has found that he truly loves hunting down the poisonous snakes hidden among the blind sheep. There is no greater satisfaction than knowing that he's provided an outlet for Hannibal's artistic side and that he's also removed a tumor of a human being at the same time.

It's becoming clear to Will that something is completely wrong with him. Three, four years ago, however much he loved Hannibal, he would never have considered trying to persuade Matthew to grow into a murderer. But now he knows he's more than capable of manipulating his best friend's perspective to make sure Hannibal will never, *ever* be under suspicion.

The impending proposal and wedding feels like a deadline of sorts, or perhaps a signal of the change of an era. Before Dad, after Dad; before marriage, after marriage.

"Dad would have been disappointed in you," says seventeen-year-old Will, perching on the edge of the huge tub. He's in scruffy jeans, the old work boots that Will has tucked away on the back porch, and the same faded flannel shirt. "He taught you right and wrong."

"He also neglected me and abused me," Will tells his younger self. "If I'd stayed with what he'd taught me, I'd have become a shadow of what I am now."

"And what are you now?" Abigail asks, from the corner of the bathroom. She's in her prison jumpsuit, still pretty and wind-chafed. The scar is vivid on her neck. "You're a murderer. An accessory to murder. You're making your best friend into a murderer. You're worse than I have ever been."

Will is impressed with his own visual memory. "I never claimed to be innocent in this."

He's not surprised that his father appears next to younger Will. "You sent a killer to Matthew. Randall Tier could've killed him and Esther."

"There are few emotions more powerful than anger," says Will. He tilts his chin up in challenge. "Randall was driven by a psychosis. Matthew was driven by a protective, righteous rage. There are pregnant mothers who fought off mountain lions to protect their children. I had every faith in Matthew to survive."

"You're reckless with other people's lives." Abigail tilts her head and smiles. It's unsettling. "Congrats. You're choosing your own life above others. Just like me."

"I'm not choosing my own life." Will stares all his hallucinations down, keenly conscious how insane this is, but also proud that he is not afraid of them. "I'm choosing Hannibal. I will always choose Hannibal."

He opens his eyes and stares at himself in the mirror. His fingers dance to the wound again, and his lips curl.

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Will meets Julie on a Friday. He isn't expecting to see her, actually - he is supposed to meet just Matthew at a cafe near Will's workplace. But Matthew and a petite blonde girl walks in, hand in hand, and Will knows this is the elusive Julie that Matthew's been talking about.

She's generically pretty. Light-colored eyes, set a little too close together, and a cascade of blonde hair that Will cannot bring himself to believe is natural, and slender. She leads the way into the cafe and waits for Matthew to lead the way to Will's table.

There's an agreeable sort of sweetness about Matthew's smile that Will likes. Dating suits him. The person he dates is... not as suitable. He stands and inclines his head slightly at the girl. "Hello. You must be Julie Benson. Matthew's talked a lot about you."

"You're Will Graham," says Julie, giving a little wave. "Hi. Nice to meet you."

Matthew grins. "Happy now?" he asks Will rhetorically. Then he turns to Julie. "What would you like to drink?"

"A caramel frappuccino with whipped cream." Julie takes a seat and drapes her cardigan over the back of the chair. "Thanks, dear."

"Will?"

"I'm good," says Will, gesturing to his iced flavored tea.

Matthew goes to join the long queue, leaving Julie with Will. He studies her under his lashes, and not liking what he sees. Julie deliberately leans forward and Will does not let his gaze fall below her chin.

"I've heard a lot about you," she says. "Matt can't stop talking about you and your boyfriend. It's almost like he holds you two up as a model couple."

"He's my best friend." Will smiles and pushes back the curl that always falls in front of his eyes. "He's probably biased."

Julie's gaze is assessing too, taking in the piano restoration workshop's uniform and her brow creasing slightly. "He said your boyfriend's a shrink."

"He's a psychiatrist, yes," says Will, "and a very successful one too."

"I can tell," Julie says, a small curl to her lips. "You have a Baume & Mercier watch, and that's a genuine Gucci duffel. Expensive taste for a piano repairman."

Will sips his iced tea. "Good eye for a pediatric nurse."

Julie shrugs and smiles. She has a lovely smile, he has to admit, but it doesn't reach her eyes. He decides to push her, see if his suspicions will be proven right.

For Matthew's sake, he hopes not.

When he casually lets his hand fall on the edge of the table, she just as *casually* lets her hand drop and cover his, her painted nails caressing the back of his hand. There's a challenging glint of invitation in her eyes; it is deeply repugnant and repellent.

Hypothesis confirmed, Will draws his hand back. "Firstly, I'm already taken. Also, I'm gay. Lastly, you're my best friend's girlfriend, or at least he believes so."

"I didn't mean anything by that," she says, too quickly and too calmly. "It was an acci-"

"Don't lie to me, Julie," he cuts in. A quick glance at the line show his friend still a few places from the barista. Will then places his elbows on the table and leans forward, mimicking her pose. "After all, my boyfriend's a shrink."

"You don't have to make a big production out of it." The young woman narrows her eyes, as though reassessing Will. She's a smart one.

Too bad this is Will Graham. "Since Mattie's sister Esther isn't likely to give you this talk, I'll do it on her behalf. Miss Benson, if you're not serious about him, then do us all a favor and break up with him quickly and gently, hmm? If you don't, it will go badly for you."

"Is that a threat?"

"I like to think of it as fair warning." Will smiles brightly at her. He knows the effect can be disarming. "I love Matthew like a brother. He's a kind and sweet guy. A woman like you doesn't deserve him."

Julie's expression darkens.

Will puts down his iced tea and plays with the condensation on the table with a finger. He draws a heart and then pierces through it with an arrow. "I wish you luck with any doctor you have your eye on, but keep Mattie out of your games. I'll give you the weekend."

She's livid and speechless. It's a minute or so before she spits out, "What Matt and I do isn't your business, Mr Graham."

"What hurts Mattie *is* my business. Don't push my patience, Miss Benson."

Just then, Matthew comes back with the drinks, and Will turns an innocent expression to his best friend. Julie sweeps up her frappuccino and marches out of the cafe without a word.

Befuddled, Matthew asks, "What's wrong? What happened?"

"Go catch up to her please," Will says with a worried little frown. "She may have misconstrued something I said to her."

*****

"Your so-called best friend is a jerk," Julie snarls when Matthew grabs her a few paces from the door to the cafe. "He came on to me, and then accused me of being unfaithful!"

"I'm sorry?" Matthew has to pause and absorb her words. Then he chortles, which annoys Julie even more. He laughs even harder when he imagines Will actually flirting with Julie, and it is only when she starts storming off again that he stops and catches up to her once more. "Sorry, sorry. I didn't mean to laugh. Look, Julie, Will's not that kind of person. I've known him since I was nineteen and he's really sweet. I'm sure it's some kind of misunderstanding."

Julie shakes Matthew's grip off. "A misunderstanding? He insulted and threatened me. What kind of best friend is he?"

"Threatened you? Julie, he's one of the nicest guys I know. He doesn't threaten anyone."

"I'm your goddamn girlfriend, Matt," she says angrily. "Don't you trust me? That Will Graham of yours isn't a nice guy at all!"

"Okay, let me talk to him, but he's not usually rude, so maybe you just mistook what he meant-"

"Fine," Julie snaps. "Take *his* side. Don't bother calling tonight, Matt, I'll be heading out."

She storms away. Matthew bites the inside of his cheek and exhales heavily. Women are hard to read. He hopes she'll have simmered down enough by evening.

*****

Will starts rising from his seat when Matthew returns to the cafe alone. "I'm sorry, I just told her to, you know, not hurt you, that kinda thing. Guess I wasn't good at that."

"Not your fault," says Matthew. They sit down together and he starts on his iced americano. "I'll call her again later or something. We're just into our first month of serious dating so I'm still feeling out the waters."

"Sorry, Mattie." Will fiddles with his cup. "Um, I got you to come to kinda give feedback for my proposal idea. Please tell me if it's too cheesy or, I don't know, not romantic enough. I want it to be perfect for Hannibal and, um, our anniversary is in a couple months and I'm getting more and more nervous thinking about doing this and oh god, I am doing this, I'm really thinking of doing this-"

"Breathe, Will," Matthew laughs, his upset girlfriend forgotten for the moment. He tilts his head. "Now. Time, place, actions."

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The Walters Art Museum is trying to entice the younger set of socialites, with its exhibit on the history of fashion. Hannibal and Will are in attendance on opening night at Hannibal's friend's request, and for someone as interested in putting together a facade as Hannibal, the new show has caught his interest.

Tonight they are dressed in three-piece suits rather than the usual black-tie - the exhibit's focus is on haute couture, and turning up in tuxedos will have been out of place. Hannibal has chosen one of his plaid suits in green, along with a purple shirt. It should look ridiculous, but the man has the gravitas to carry the color combination with aplomb. Will for his part opted for an olive green suit and cream-colored shirt, with a dark brown leather tie. The suit has pale brown piping, adding a structural element to the outfit.

Hannibal is greeted by Emanuella James, the curator, and they are soon joined by Alana and Beverly and some other acquaintances of Hannibal's. Will smiles and nods politely, but excuses himself after a few minutes. There is only so much socializing he can endure before he gets too bored.

Wandering off on his own, Will takes in the displays with mild curiosity. He doesn't remain all by his lonesome for long. Krissy Hahn, Mikolaj's ex, kisses Will on the cheek and slips her arm through his. "Will, I am so glad to see you. I heard about the attack only yesterday; I was in the Maldives sorting out the guest accommodations and all that. How are you?"

"Krissy, you look wonderful." Will squeezes her hand. "I'm fine, thank you. How are the wedding preparations coming along then, other than the Maldives?"

They've found in each other useful shields against unwanted hangers-on. Will doesn't like people to try to befriend him because they want a chance to get closer to Hannibal; Krissy hates the brown-nosers who try to flatter her because her family's political connections. They aren't really in each other's personal social circles, having no common denominator beyond Mikolaj, but at these events, they always act like they're the best of friends.

The brunette is more than happy to complain about her incompetent wedding planner. Apparently, her planner has mixed up the color of her gown and they have to remake the dress in less than two weeks. Krissy is making the wedding planner's company foot the bill for that. Will just listens and nods at the appropriate moments, and notes down the date of her wedding.

The event photographer comes by and snaps a few shots. Will puts on his version of a mask and waits it out. Once the guy leaves, Will rolls his eyes and turns his back to the milling crowd.

"I'm still not comfortable with all the picture-taking," says Will, sipping on some champagne. Yay legal drinking age.

Krissy shrugs. "You'll get used to it. They just need faces to pretty up the society pages."

"I'm a jumped-up commoner, Krissy, not a member of the trust fund posse." Will glances over at a cluster of socialites, all pretending to adore one another while scheming to outshine all the others. "I don't belong on the society pages."

"You'll pass as one of us." For someone who is part of the trust fund posse, Krissy is as down-to-earth as they come. She sips on her own flute of champagne delicately and smiles at another socialite, who comes over. "Leia! I wasn't expecting to see you. Leia, this is Will Graham. Will, this is Leia Wong. She started up a - what was it? - a software company or something with her boyfriend."

The tanned Asian with dyed honey-blond hair shook Will's hand. "Just a data management program, Krissy, not a company. Sold that four months ago. We're working on developing another focusing on apps. Hello."

"Pleasure," Will says.

"What do you do?" Leia asks.

"Nothing as impressive," Will admits readily. "I restore antique pianos."

To his gratified surprise, the woman only nods without the usual condescension he encounters frequently in these circles. "It's a rare skill set. How are you finding the exhibits?"

"Fashion isn't my thing." The young man glances over at Hannibal, who is now deep in discussion with Alana while examining at a collection of white dresses by Valentino. "My boyfriend's the one who's a fashion plate. He was delighted when he heard what Emanuella was bringing in."

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Leia turns out to be an engaging conversationalist whose interests range from technology to Ancient Greek literature. They are soon joined by Krissy's fiancé, Reggie Holden, and Leia's boyfriend Tang Rui. A few more photos later and Leia is suggesting that they ditch the exhibition for some dancing and music. They start debating which club to go to.

Will isn't familiar with what they are talking about - he's not really a clubbing sort - but he's eager to get out of this place. He's already been seen and displayed adequately. "I'll tell Hannibal while you guys decide."

Hannibal is in the middle of discussing the impact of Italian tailoring on mainstream menswear with Beverly when Will comes up to him and touches his arm.

"We're going out to a club," Will murmurs. "Not sure which yet. Don't wait up."

The doctor smiles and kisses him back. Will sees the grin on Beverly's face and rolls his eyes before walking off to join Krissy and Reggie.

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The place they chose is intimate and cool in an unpretentious way. Will's taken off his jacket and loosened his tie. Reggie has designated himself the driver so he's not drinking; they manage to find themselves a table and settle in to enjoy the music. It's crowded but not rambunctiously so, but Rui assures him that it will start getting more and more packed as the night approaches.

"Beer selection isn't much," says Reggie. "We come here for the music more than anything."

"I can see why," says Will. He appreciates Krissy's consideration and leans over to tell her, "Thanks. I owe you one."

She pats his knee. "Next time, let me take you to Grand Central. More options for both you and Dr Lecter."

Will has to smile at the thought of Hannibal in a sea of dancing bodies. The image is incongruous with all that he knows of his lover. "I don't think he'll like it."

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When they've finished their second round of drinks, the two ladies hit the dance floor and grab Will along, leaving their respective partners behind. It is jam-packed now.

"So this was your nefarious plan?"

"The boys hate dancing," says Krissy with a laugh. "And this way, you keep others from groping us."

"I could be the one with wandering hands," he pouts, but the beat is infectious and he is content with letting the music move him. It's almost hypnotic, the release of conscious control over his body. The press of bodies against his own stirs a mild sense of nausea that he pushes aside. Hannibal will smell them on him and if Will plays his cards right, the doctor will be very eager to reassert his claim.

It's wonderful, grooving to the heavy, repetitive music - Will has no illusions that his tastes are probably two decades too old - with no expectations for more. The young women dance

with him, holding hands and pressing close, and there are a few envious glances from a number of guys who are on the dance floor as well.

When he starts feeling a little light-headed, Will excuses himself to go to the bathroom. Someone is in one of the cubicles - some *two,* he corrects mentally when he hears the telltale grunt and gasp. It's none of his business so he just rinses his face and sweeps back his curls.

He's on his way back to the table to allow the guys to dance with their women when he sees the couple exiting the bathroom. The guy is a tall, broad-shouldered black man; the woman is blonde and familiar. They kiss on the edge of the dance floor.

Will narrows his eyes. The vindication he feels is nothing compared to the outrage on behalf of Matthew.

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"I have to tell him something," Will insists over breakfast as he serves the bacon. He climbed into bed last night in a dark mood and roused Hannibal for some angry sex, all the while smelling of too many people. The doctor obliged him last night with even more bruises and marks to distract the tumultuous thoughts from his lover, and that led to this late Sunday morning.

Apparently Will hasn't forgotten his indignation. Hannibal plates the crepes he's made, artfully placing raspberry compote and drizzling honey over the delicate folds. "He won't believe your accusations unless there is proof."

"I'm his best friend."

"She's his girlfriend."

"Fine," Will pouts. "Be logical."

Hannibal smiles and kisses the pursed lips. "It's far easier for a person to deny the truth of what's happening when they don't see or hear it."

The younger man sips on his coffee thoughtfully. "So I have to set her up?"

"Think of it as a hunt," suggests Hannibal. This is also a great chance for him to see if Matthew can take the next step, from killer to murderer. If Will and he could frame Matthew's perspective correctly, then he will have an apprentice and a successor. Perhaps not to the Chesapeake Ripper's kills - that one is gone for good, unless someone digs up the ghosts - but something new. There is darkness in Matthew, as there is in everyone, but so far none has embraced it the way Will has. It will be a delight to see if the other young man has the temerity to realize his potential.

With a broad grin, Will cocks his head of dark curls, looking angelic in his loose white shirt. "Observation. Enticement. Action."

"Start tonight, mon amour. By next week we should be able to set up the lure," says Hannibal.

Will hears the pronoun and is delighted. "We?"

"We have yet to go out hunting this season," says the older man, his maroon eyes glinting scarlet in the light of the late morning sun. He wants to hunt with his Will by his side, picking out those unworthy of life. It has been too long. "And if this woman is what you've described her to be, then I am the perfect lure."

"I knew there was a reason why I love you so," declares Will, and kisses his boyfriend thoroughly enough for them both to forgo breakfast and return to bed.

Chapter End Notes

Joseph Haydn Sinfonia concertante for violin, cello, oboe, bassoon, and orchestra, Hob.I:105

Chapter 8

Matthew and Esther sit together in the narrow backyard and watch the stars overhead, while their mother is locked in a shouting match with their father about alimony. The siblings try to ignore her, and are marginally successful.

"Some of these stars are already dead and gone," Esther tells Matthew in a matter-of-fact tone. "They're so far away that their light is only just reaching us."

"But they're still beautiful even after they're gone." Matthew holds his sister's hand and squeezes.

Esther rests her head on Matthew's shoulder. "Is that a metaphor?"

"It can be, if you want it to be."

"When I'm dead, will people still think of me? Like we are thinking about stars that are already dead?"

Matthew hugs his sister around her thin shoulders. "Of course. When I die, you'll think of me, won't you? But we're not gonna die yet. So we'll have to do lots and lots of things to shine, so that many people will remember me."

The neighbors' TV are not loud enough to drown out their mother. Matthew wishes she would just shut up, but his dad deserved to be shouted at. Esther hates it when they shout, however. Matthew understands - he used to think it was all his fault that their parents couldn't be together, and he still recalls his temporary bouts of muteness after one of their really terrible fights before his father left them for good.

Esther sighs and snuggles closer under Matthew's arm. "I cried in school today."

"What happened?"

"Chloe said she was over the moon because Toby called her, and I told her that's not possible because no one can be over a natural satellite unless they are in a spacecraft and even then they're not over it, they go around it. She called me a stupid retard." Esther curls up her knees and wraps her arms around them.

"That's a mean thing to say, and you're not," says Matthew, a fierce surge of love rising within.

"I know I'm not, but they keep saying it. I wish more people are like you," she says. "Or like Will and Hannibal. They don't try to use metaphors with me, but they don't treat me like I'm stupid. I know I'm not like other kids, I can't really understand what they mean when they use some words and mean something else. But it doesn't mean I can't feel. Like I can look at stars and know that they are balls of flaming gas and the constellation's declination and right

ascension, but I can still see that they're bright and beautiful and they make the night so much better than just darkness."

Matthew presses a soft kiss to his sister's brow and hugs her closer. He wishes other people can look past her learning disabilities and see how wonderful she really is. The hurt at the insult feels as real to him as it must have done to his baby sister; God knows he suffered the label back when he was still struggling with his speech impediment.

"Whatever anyone else says," Matthew tells Esther, "know that I love you the most and the best of anyone in the world. If I have to use a metaphor, you are the brightest star in my life."

"The sun is the brightest star of our world," Esther informs him primly.

"Then you are the sun of my life." He smiles broadly at his sister. "Is that a metaphor you like?"

She nods, and returns the smile. "Do you like Julie?"

"I do, very much," Matthew answers honestly. "Do you?"

"Kinda." Esther flops down on the grass. Her brother wants to scold her for the grass stains that will inevitably get on her clothes, but he bites his tongue. Stains can be washed out. "But I miss Will and Hannibal and Buster and Winston. Ever since you started going out with her, we haven't been to see them. Is it because of her?"

That instantly makes a ball of guilt flare hot in Matthew's belly. It's true, he has barely exchanged ten texts with Will since the two met. Julie insists on them spending their Fridays together, it being their common days off, and on the other days he's free he is too busy trying to get caught up in helping Esther's school work that he forgets meeting up with his best friend.

It's obvious that Will doesn't like Julie. Will has told him baldly that Julie isn't trustworthy, but Matthew only replied that she's the one who initiated their relationship, and he has no reason to suspect her of anything. That retort has led to the past week of silent treatment from Will, but he and Hannibal are still talking to Esther now and then, so it's not like they have cut the Brown siblings out of their lives completely.

"I'll ask Will whether we can visit soon," says Matthew. He will have to explain to Julie, but he's not going to deprive Esther of other people who love her.

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If it had only been Will who dislikes Julie, Matthew may have let his suspicions go. But his mother, wretched woman though she is, is not complimentary either. There's also a certain odd cast to the way Julie's flatmates look at him whenever they go out as a group that is somewhere between amusement and pity. It bugs him that they seem to know something he doesn't, but Julie's assured him that they're just curious about him, since they've heard what he does with her behind closed doors.

He does wonder, very privately, if it'll be better if it's just sex between them. Simpler, at least.

Emotions are so *messy.*

He's not used to all this feeling about himself, all this *caring*. For practically his entire life he's content in his little niche. He didn't really resent being invisible. He loves taking care of his sister. He has his job now as a nurse, helping people like him. Never has he considered dating or, hell, even getting attached to anybody outside of Esther. If this is what being in a relationship feels like, no wonder people fuck up.

How do Will and Dr Lecter do this?

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One afternoon Will calls, to his surprise, and Matthew returns the call during his coffee break. It's been a difficult day - an inmate just tried to swallow his spoon, and O'Leary has been on everyone's ass for no reason - so Matthew's rather curt when his best friend finally picks up after the eighth ring.

"Oh. Caught you at a bad time?" Will says, apparently a psychic.

Matthew runs his hand through his hair and leans against the rec room wall. "Bad day is all. What's up?"

"I've been thinking if I ought to tell you this, but if it were Hannibal I'd have wanted to know, so, um." There is a slow inhalation on the other end of the line, as though Will is taking a deep breath. *"Julie's cheating on you. I saw her."*

"Oh." That's probably not the response to give. Matthew frowns and tries to articulate the strange roil of emotions inside his gut. "That's not... No. That's not true. Will, I know you don't like her, but Julie isn't cheating. She promises that we're exclusive."

"She lied."

"You can't make up these things just because you hate her, Will!" Matthew shouts. He's stunned at his own outburst, but his tongue has taken the lead and he's swearing at his best friend. "Just shut up! She's not, okay? I trust her! I trust her. I have to."

Will isn't having any of Matthew's reply. *"She doesn't deserve your trust. She doesn't deserve you."*

"Fuck you, Will Graham," Matthew curses. "You don't get to- Will, you don't get to do this. Not to me. Not when I'm your best friend."

He remembers the kiss that's barely a brush of lips, the look in Will's eyes, the warmth of his best friend's hands. The way Will and Dr Lecter gaze at each other. The near-telepathic understanding between them. He wants all that and he knows he can never have it, and he's

glad to settle for just a pleasant girl with whom he can enjoy great sex, and now Will wants to tear it all away-

"I'm telling you this because you're my best friend," Will retorts.

The silence that falls between the two friends is jarring.

Finally, Will says, *"If I can prove it, will you accept it?"*

Matthew bites the tip of his tongue. He can't help the bitter reluctance in his heart; he knows Will isn't going to let the matter rest. Can't the guy understand that Matthew is content to let things be? Instead, Matthew says, "Fine. You find proof, and I'll take a look at it."

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Despite Will's ultimatum, Julie Benson has not broken up with Matthew.

He has not hidden his disdain of the woman, but she's wily. It's played off as some sort of jealousy, Will suspects, because Matthew stops visiting and barely texts. The phone call Will made only cements his suspicions that Matthew is deliberately ignoring his instincts that Julie isn't worth his time. Isn't worth Matthew.

It irks Will that Julie isn't satisfied with cheating on her boyfriend, she's driving a wedge between the two best friends and taking Esther away from Hannibal, who adores the girl almost like a daughter. Will Graham is not about to stand for that.

He's been observing her ever since he discussed with Hannibal what to do about the entire mess. To her credit, Julie is amazing at time management. She lives two lives and they are clearly separate. The first is the one her friends know about, the other is the secret self that Will wants Matthew to *see.*

Three nights of the week, she is the girl Matthew likes a lot, and Will can acknowledge the appeal. She's fun and cheerful, in floaty sundresses with careless braids or ponytails. She and her friends go to the clubs to dance and have fun. If this is all she was, Will would have liked her. After all, her behavior isn't all that different from his colleagues' on their nights out.

However, if Matthew isn't around, Julie finds random guys and hooks up with them for the evening. Her close friends know and, to their credit, Will has seen them try to dissuade her. She always brushes them off. Fidelity issues aside, it is a health risk and Will really, *really* finds it irresponsible.

On Thursday and Sunday nights, however, she steps into her other life, and goes off alone to a smaller club called Zodiac, where the clientele are older and looking for a different sort of connection.

He went in on a different night to scope out the place. There is a sunken dance floor, ringed by booths, but no one is just dancing for enjoyment; they dancing to display themselves. Those in the booths watch. Will, pretending to be part of the exhibition, observes how the

exchanges are navigated. Those in the booths are looking to buy - not with anything as crass as *money* - and those on the dance floor are selling their young bodies. A glance and tilt of the head, a smile, perhaps a gesture; those in the shadowed booths have their own patterns that yet unmistakably convey their intents. Sometimes the bolder ones go up to the booths and offer themselves, and then there may be further negotiations below the pounding, sensuous beat of the music that Will can't get close enough to hear, but can extrapolate simply by looking.

He also notices a few faces that belong to the fringes of Hannibal's social circle, those that know Hannibal and perhaps Will by sight but are not familiar enough to warrant dinner invitations. Will is slightly concerned, and exits the club before they spot him.

*****

Hannibal has an easy solution to the problem.

“Those who see us there together will naturally assume that we're on a date,” says the doctor, calmly arranging roses from slices of Duroc jamon. “Especially if we put on a show of us having a bit of fun."

"I don't get it."

"Role playing is, I understand, a kink for some couples.”

"*How* is that better?" Will sputters over his preparation of sauce veloute.

"It'll be terribly boorish to talk openly of us in that context," says Hannibal with the tiny almost-smile that he has perfected.

Will narrows his eyes. "You just want me to try this kink out, don't you?"

"I have already experimented extensively in my youth, mongoose. It's only fair that you get your opportunity to sample. I will however admit I look forward to exploring a different aspect to our sex life, yes." How the doctor can say that with a straight face and the *blandest* possible voice baffles Will, but the younger man doesn't make any comment other than to stick out his tongue.

*****

*****

“How do I look?”

Hannibal looks away from his own reflection and blinks in appreciative amusement at Will's transformation. His boyfriend has always dressed for comfort first, and, on the occasions when they are out to make an impression, Will always opts for timeless, classic suits that subtly adds a touch of maturity to him, to diminish the age difference between them.

Now Will looks his age, or even a little younger. He's in dark jeans that are really fitted, and they cling almost indecently to his ass. He's put on a fitted white shirt with gray piping which

will probably be sheer with perspiration if he ends up on the dance floor. His curls have been tamed with gel, but there is a hint of tousle, like he's just put himself back together after a passionate kiss. It's a tantalizing sight.

“Lip gloss?” Hannibal teases. It's a beguiling touch, and he wants to kiss it off. Not yet though – he has his cue, as does Will, on the stage where they will play out their evening.

Will hasn't put too much gloss on, barely a dab, but enough to highlight the enticing fullness of the young man's lower lip. He smiles and leans his hip against the doorway, pulling a thin pencil from his jeans pocket. “I was thinking a bit of liner for my eyes too, but would that be too much?”

“Let's see how it makes you look,” Hannibal offers, taking the eyeliner pencil from him.

Will sits at the foot of the bed and lowers his eyelids. The doctor carefully traces a line along the upper lid, his surgeon's hands steady and confident, as though he does this for a living. When Will opens his eyes with a flutter of lashes, Hannibal is struck by how much more alluring the familiar storm-blue eyes are with the subtly enhanced framing. He tells Will to look upwards, and traces the lower eyelid carefully.

“And women do this every day? I have renewed admiration for them,” says Will, blinking rapidly to adjust. He darts into the bathroom to check himself out. Hannibal laughs when he hears his lover exclaim, “Holy *fuck,* I'm hot.”

“And not overtly flamboyant either,” says Hannibal with approval. He pecks a kiss on Will's cheek and murmurs, “We should do this more often.”

Will smirks. “Do we really need role-playing to spice up our sex life, darlin'?” The last word is played up, and Will bites his lower lip to be just a little more flirtatious.

“Variety is the spice of life, mon amour, and I do so fear you'll tire of me.”

“Never,” Will promises fervently, and brushes the pad of his thumb over the curve of Hannibal's lips. “See you in a while, stranger.”

*****

If Julie really doesn't want to be caught, she should not have a pattern to her cheating.

Will gets into Zodiac early, and is soon flirting extravagantly with another woman and her boyfriend. She's black, he's Thai, and they are very attractive. They're definitely interested, if the heat in their gazes is anything to go by, and while Will drinks and laughs with them, he wonders what dishes Hannibal would make from their lungs. Still, they're respectful of his boundaries - no kissing on the lips - so he stays with them. They've bought him two drinks thus far and he's kept to the lighter side of the selection, and their conversation never strays into serious topics. He tells them to call him Gray, and they accept it with knowing smiles.

Once there is a decent crowd, he leads them to the dance floor, the three of them soon dancing together in a close press of bodies. They are both a decade older than he; they

sandwich him in between them, keeping him trapped and warm. Her breasts are soft against his chest, her slinky, glittery black dress sliding sensuously over his shirt, but Will is far more aroused by the hard line of the man's cock against his ass. He has a wonderful cologne too, heady and strong that even has a hint of lemongrass, and Will allows him slightly more liberty to splay his hands over his hips even as she insinuates one of Will's legs between her own.

Hannibal may just have her leg for dinner. Will imagines it's Hannibal behind him, even though the older man won't ever allow himself to lose his dignity in dancing to such horrendous music; the visual of Hannibal grinding against his ass while they remain anonymous in a crowd is laughable.

They're not his prey tonight, however; he allows them their teasing kisses on his neck and ear, always avoiding their mouths, playing his calloused fingers on the napes of their neck or the sensitive underside of their arms, occasionally threading his hands through their hair; his gaze never leaves the entrance of the club for long.

He soon sees Julie entering. She looks ready to hunt, her tight canary-yellow dress with artfully placed cut-outs teetering on the edge of being tacky, her make-up impeccable and elegant. A far cry from the sweet girl who goes out with Matthew and her friends, with her floral dresses and braids or soft curls. She looks around the club to identify potentials and then stares into the sunken dance floor, where others like her have already begun offering themselves for consideration.

Will wonders if she's seen him, writhing between the older couple, allowing their hands to wander over his body freely. A quick glance confirms his suspicions, but he doesn't let his gaze linger. She is looking in his direction and has definitely noticed Will and his new friends, but there's little he can read from her expression.

Hannibal appears almost two minutes after she comes in. With his hair shaken loose and a fitted burgundy shirt almost the color of old blood, he looks nearly as dangerous as he truly is. The sharp planes of his face is made more impossibly elegant by the lights, his eyes shadowed by the sculpted brow. His entrance is not unnoticed; a few of the dancers murmur, as though they recognize him.

Will knows it's not his imagination that Hannibal zeroes in on him instantly. It's as though electricity arcs from one to the other, and Will deliberately lets his lips part on a sigh as he grinds back against the man he's been playing with. His lover's gaze darkens with amusement and warning, before he scans the crowd again. He watches Hannibal navigate his way to a booth, and then Will extricates himself from the couple.

“Sorry, darlings,” he says sweetly, “but I'm having second thoughts.”

The woman – Will can't remember her name at all – smiles crookedly. “You're aiming for that one? Good luck, babe.”

“Hmm? Why would I need it?”

“Seen him come in the past few evenings,” says the man, now pulling his girlfriend close to him. “Lots of offers, none taken so far.”

Will smirks. “None of the offers have been me.”

A glance at Hannibal sees him being entertained by a girl far too blatant about trying to land the doctor. Her dress has more similarities with body paint than fabric. Will is not surprised by his irrational burst of jealousy but clamps his reaction down. Hannibal's past few nights here have won him fans already, because even as Will is watching, a young man with long red hair tied in a ponytail and incredible legs goes up to his table and drops into the seat beside Hannibal.

They are playing their hands over the psychiatrist and he allows them to flirt outrageously at him, the curve of his lips almost welcoming. His arm is thrown over the back of the seat and the young red-haired man snuggles close.

Oh, now that *is too much.*

Will finishes his drink and saunters over, graceful and predatory. He knows there are some others in the room who are watching him with acute desire and admiration, and there is at least one plastic surgeon who knows Hannibal who's sitting in a booth near the back with his mistress.

The two whom Hannibal is enjoying look up when Will comes over to the booth. The girl smiles coyly. “He's taken.”

“Is he now,” says Will, his voice intense and low with need. He tilts his head and bites on his lower lip. "Are you really?"

“I can choose not to be,” Hannibal drawls, “if you're offering.”

Will lets a feral smile curl his lips. “I am.”

The girl and the redheaded boy seem almost offended by Hannibal's dismissal, but in this place they really are not the ones holding the power. Since Hannibal doesn't want them, they don't get to stay. After they leave the booth, Will slides up the seat and nonchalantly crawls over the doctor's lap, his hands on Hannibal's shoulders. The doctor's hands go to Will's slim hips and he raises his eyebrows.

"Rather forward of you."

“If you ask me for a lap dance, you're sleeping in the study,” Will informs his boyfriend with a sultry smirk.

Hannibal's response is to slip his hands up Will's waist and back, pulling him in closer to kiss him on the mouth. They move slowly, Will's hips rolling in a sensual rhythm in time with the music over Hannibal's hips, the layers of their clothes keeping things decent for now.

When Hannibal pulls away, he murmurs, “Maybe after we get home you'll grace me with one.”

“Perhaps,” says Will. “Or maybe *you* can give me one, darlin'.”

“We have other matters to pursue for tonight, regrettably.” Hannibal runs fingers along the buttons of Will's shirt.

Will grins and slithers off. “I'll grab a drink and let you know. Scotch?”

“Scotch.”

*****

She approaches him at the bar.

“Surprising to see you here,” Julie says when he's given his orders to the bartender. “Does your psychiatrist boyfriend know what you get up to?”

“Julie. I'd say it's a pleasure but I'll be lying.” Will makes a show that he's unpleasantly surprised by her presence. “What matter is that of yours whether my boyfriend knows or not?”

“It'll be a shame if I told Matthew now, won't it? He idolizes you and your doctor boyfriend. I wonder what he'll do if he knows you're a lying, cheating scumbag.”

"Like you?" Will narrows his eyes and glares at her. “What do you want?”

“Him,” says Julie simply, with a jerk of her chin at Hannibal.

“He's mine,” says Will. “Find your own.”

“He's hot, and you have to learn to be giving,” she says. “Otherwise, I'll tell. And you'll be dumped so fast, you'll suffer windburn on your ass.”

“Fuck you.”

“You threaten me, I return the favor. Fair's fair.”

Will exhales heavily and works his jaw, as though in annoyance. “I'll have to ask if he wants more company. No way am I gonna let you have someone that gorgeous all to yourself.”

"All right then." Julie smiles like a particularly satisfied weasel. “I'm open to sharing.”

*****

Will drapes himself all over the older man and whispers against his incredible cheekbone, “She wants to join us.”

“Have her come over, and then you can drop a message to Matthew,” says Hannibal, lips tugging on Will's earlobe. “Key's behind the stone lion.”

“It'll take him twenty minutes to get from his house to ours.”

“I'm sure you can endure dancing with her to please me in the meantime,” Hannibal says, the soft curve of his eyes the only hint to the tease.

"Fine." Will tests his teeth on Hannibal's lower lip a little too hard. “If Matthew doesn't show up, I'm gonna kill her myself, and set fire to these clothes afterwards.”

*****

Hannibal lounges like a big cat, Will thinks privately, all languid sprawl and half-lidded eyes, and here Will is snuggled against this alpha predator. Julie is drinking from Hannibal's tumbler, from his hand, the entire farce a play at intimacy, while Will peppers Hannibal's neck with nipping kisses. He's already boiling inside from the few kisses Hannibal has shared with Julie, and is plotting how to extract the woman's tongue in order to make her choke on it.

A discreet check on his watch tells him that it's time to head home. Matthew should be there by now.

“Let's go somewhere private,” Will suggests, his left hand sliding over Hannibal's torso and down to his belt, resting just above the older man's crotch. It is the code that Matthew has gone over to the Lecter residence. “Maybe your car?”

“If there's just one of you, perhaps,” says Hannibal, nuzzling into Will's hair while he rubbed the knuckle of his thumb over the hollow of Julie's throat. "I'd prefer someplace more comfortable to accommodate us."

The young woman bares her neck and Hannibal obliges with a slow lick up the proffered column of skin. Will's fingers twitch to shove themselves into her esophagus and rip out her vocal cords. She's practically *purring*, and the gleam of triumph in her eyes as she peers at Will through her lashes sends flashes of murderous rage through the young man.

“If not a car, perhaps a hotel,” Julie says in a sultry tone.

“Or perhaps my house?” Hannibal offers. “I'll even make you breakfast.”

Julie agrees too readily. Will pretends to dither, and finally says, “I'll go, but I'm afraid I can't stay the night.”

“Oh?” Dark maroon eyes glitter, the darkness beneath swirling with humor. “Why not?”

“I've another commitment with a friend of mine in the morning.” Will lowers his lashes demurely, and it is so outrageous that Hannibal foregoes the pretense for a second and kisses his lover with utter glee.

*****

"i have proof. go to my house, remain in the study. don't turn on the main lights; you can use the desk lamp instead."

It's not without some trepidation that Matthew does as Will says. Something suspicious is going on, and whatever it is Will has planned, Dr Lecter must be in on it too. It's unnerving knowing that he is going into their home without either of the owners present, and at such a late hour.

He sits in the pool of golden light at the desk, as though it's a boundary between him and whatever Will is going to show him. He wants to remain ignorant, yet resents his own resistance towards acknowledging the doubts in his belly. He hears the door open and his stomach clenches when he hears a laugh that is too horribly familiar.

*****

Will tries to tune Julie out, but the way she's *clinging* to Hannibal is getting on his nerves. More annoyingly, the older man is playing his part to perfection - he's nipping at her neck as he unlocks the door, and then after she sashays inside, grabs Will and kisses him with far too much tongue.

You taste of her, Will conveys via a glare.

Hannibal only smirks. "Why don't you two get comfortable in the sitting room and I'll get us some wine?"

"Okay," says Julie. She walks in and tosses her coat over a chair. Will narrows his eyes at that, but Hannibal pinches his ass before he walks into the kitchen, derailing Will's train of thought for a second. "He's a really good catch. This is gorgeous."

"If you're looking for a good catch, why are you with Matthew then? He's pretty Wonder Bread." He takes the armchair that faces the study's entrance.

"He's useful. Keeps the flies off me, and he's eager to please, which makes for great sex," says Julie, sitting down on the couch as Will intended. She crosses her legs at the ankles and stares at Will curiously. " Why exactly are you so concerned about him anyway? I mean, sure, I'm sleeping with other dudes, but he's the one I'm going out with regularly. I'll ditch him when I snag my own doctor, but in the meantime he's getting laid on a regular basis by a pretty blonde - me - so I'd think it's pretty good deal."

"I don't like that you lie to him," says Will. "He actually likes you and might even grow to love you. He's too good for you to hurt."

"Are you in love with him?"

"He's my best friend." Will blinks, lizard-slow, when he catches sight of a shadow at the doorway of the study. "I care deeply for him and Esther."

Julie snorts. "That retarded sister? Honestly, if she's out of the picture, I might give more of a damn. But he's so fucking devoted to her."

It takes all of Will's self-control not to kill her. However, it's time for him to exit the stage. "Hello Matthew."

*****

"Hi Will." Matthew stands in the doorway, all five foot eight inches of icy calm.

Julie bolts to her feet and spins around to stare aghast at her boyfriend. "Matthew?" She gapes only for another second before she whirls around and glares at Will. "You set me up?"

"I did. My boyfriend helped," Will says. "But you were the one who insisted on crashing my date."

Dr Lecter emerges from the shadows where he has been listening. "Good evening, Matthew."

"Good evening sir."

Julie's eyes are wide, and her shocked gaze falls on one man and then the other, before turning back to Matthew. "Matt, this isn't what it looks like."

"Oh?" It is almost terrifying how composed Matthew sounds, if Will could be scared by his best friend. "Because what I see is a lying, cheating bitch who has used me."

"Matt-"

"I never asked for a relationship. I was happy just being friends. And when you said we were exclusive, I believed you. I actually shouted at my best friend because I wanted to trust you." Matthew takes one step forward.

Julie takes three back and almost collides with Will; she jerks away from the near collision as though electrified. She takes a breath and says shakily, "I understand you're upset. I'm sorry I hooked up with other guys, I really am. If you want to break up with me, that's... that's okay."

"Honestly, I don't care that you've slept with other men. I just wished you'd been frank with me. If you'd told me that you wanted me to play your boyfriend to keep other guys away, I'd have done it, even without the sex," says Matthew. there's also the bit about Esther, but he fears that if he talks about that now, he will beat Julie to death with his bare hands. He exhales and reins in the dark urge. "Get out of my sight. I never want to see you again."

"You're letting her go?" It's Will's turn to be shocked.

"Yes, Will." Matthew's darkest suspicions coalesce into clear thought: *Will wanted me to kill her. He wanted me to kill Randall Tier.*

Will wants me to be a killer.

Just like he is. Just like Dr Lecter.

Dr Lecter inclines his head, accepting Matthew's decision. "Come along, Miss Benson."

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I don't know if it helps now, but I never really wanted to hurt Matthew," says Julie Benson at the door. "I get why you and Will did all this for him. But it was a shitty thing to do."

Hannibal inclines his head. "As was your deception and infidelity, Miss Benson. Shall we call it a draw?"

"And what did Will mean about Matt letting me go?"

"Whatever do you think he meant?" The doctor smiles faintly. Julie Benson is smart but not smart enough. Freddie Lounds would have picked up the underlying threat already. "Goodnight. Safe trip home."

He shut the door in her face. While he would love to indulge his artistic self, right now there is something far more interesting. A clash between his Will's fire and Matthew's ice is definitely a better show than whatever Hannibal can put on.

*****

The two combatants are still standing where they were left, staring at each other across the room. There is a different sort of awareness in Matthew's eyes. He carries himself differently, somehow; wary and aggressive. Will isn't smiling, and there's a vulpine cunning to his eyes that probably is meant to be seen.

Hannibal's entrance does not distract them from their stand-off. The doctor turns on some of the lights and neither of them blink. It's fascinating - Will the mongoose, circling and waiting for Matthew to bare his fangs and strike. There is caution and resentment in the air, along with a great deal of curiosity and anticipation; all three of them know that no one is leaving the house without being altered, perhaps even at a fundamental level.

Matthew is preternaturally still; the tension in his arms does not tighten his shoulders. It is admirable how in control he is; Hannibal sees a hint of his younger self in this young man. In contrast, Will is all motion, barely contained in his body. His eyes skim over his best friend, and his fingers twitch over the hem of his white shirt. There is that foxlike cunning in that barest hint of a smile about his soft lips - the gloss has long since been kissed away - and there is also anger beneath his cautious pacing.

Matthew makes the first move. "Why did you want me to kill Julie, Will?"

"Because she's lied to you and cheated on you," Will states simply. His pacing is almost hypnotically slow. "She doesn't deserve you."

"People lie and betray. It doesn't mean they deserve to die. And she wasn't the only one to lie to me, is she?" Matthew asks. He tilts his head and regards Will, as though seeing the younger man for the first time. "Or perhaps I'm just starting to see you more clearly."

Hannibal watches from his vantage point on the top step by the door. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the two young men are mirroring each other's posture, but Will is shifting and fluid, while Matthew's stillness would have put statues to shame.

Who is the mirror here? Hannibal wonders.

"I never lied to you," says Will. "I told you I didn't trust her. Tonight I've shown you why."

"And yet," Matthew says slowly, his eyes darker than Hannibal has ever seen, "I feel betrayed not by her, but by *you*."

Will meets the dark gaze. Hannibal wishes he is in a position to see the play of emotions across his lover's face; Will is stunningly dangerous when his heart is displayed for the world.

Incongruously, Matthew smiles. "You were supposed to be my best friend."

"I *am* your best friend," says Will. "There is no one in the world who understands you better than I do."

"No one? Will, you just tried to make me kill an unarmed woman. That's not what a best friend does!"

"I'm not trying to *make* you a killer, Matthew, you already *are* one. I just wanted you to acknowledge that."

Now Matthew is the restless one and Will motionless. If Hannibal could choreograph a dance, then this one being played out between his lover and his potential protege is a fascinating interplay of power shifts. Again their postures reflect the other person's: Matthew's hand brushes over his lips and Will rubs his knuckles across his mouth.

Matthew exhales and it seems as though a weight slides off his shoulders. "I killed that man to protect my family."

"Once you had him down on the floor and the skull helmet shattered you have already protected your family," Will points out with deadly nonchalance. "You kept swinging the bat because you liked it, you liked having his life at your mercy-"

"Don't you dare-"

"You've dreamed of killing him again and again and *again,* you keep bringing him back to life in a bizarre parody of Lazarus just so you can make it more *intimate,* draw it out longer." Will steps forward, closing the distance. As though planned, Matthew moves closer too. Will's upper lip curls. "You said so yourself - it feels good to kill him again, even if it's only in your head."

Hannibal comes closer to the two young men, but they are so engrossed in their battle that neither acknowledges him.

It can all end in violence, still. The tension in the atmosphere is shrill and deafening. The doctor is aware that everyone in the house knows that should violence break out, Matthew will die.

Yet Matthew does not back down. It is breathtaking, his iron control. "Or maybe you're seeing what you want to see, and blaming me for it. Maybe *you're* the one who wants to be a killer again."

"Me." Will's voice is flat.

"You said so yourself," Matthew mocks, advancing on his best friend. "You killed your former boss. You *smashed* his head in to save Dr Lecter. You also dreamed about killing him again and again and *again.* Is that why you were so curious about me and what I did to that Tier guy? Did I remind you of your crime? Made you curious if anyone is as insane as you?"

Hannibal shifts to the other end of the room, just behind Matthew, should he need to break the young man's neck. It would be a pity - he thinks Matthew has never seem more alive than he does now, facing down someone he loves. There is a light in his face and a fervor thrumming beneath the evenness of his tone.

When the doctor looks at Will, there is a strange elation in the young man's blue eyes. Will actually smiles. "My curiosity is about you, and centers around why you deny yourself the truth, Matthew. And you are similarly *curious* about me."

"The kid who befriended me through spending an incredible sum on overpriced books just to save me from humiliation is also the same guy who's outraged that I didn't kill my girlfriend. Damn right I'm curious. What are you trying to do, Will?"

Hannibal catches and holds Will's gaze. The younger man blinks, a slow rejection of murdering Matthew.

"I'm trying to free the killer in you," says Will. "It's there, it's been there from the start, and now I see it more and more clearly."

"Most sane people will want a killer imprisoned, not freed."

"I'm not most people," Will says.

Matthew shakes his head. "A crazy best friend. Of course."

Will bares his teeth in a smile. "Are you gonna pretend to be normal now? Because I think I know you well enough to say that you're not one of them either. Not part of the mindless flcok. If you'd just free yourself to accept that potential in you-"

"What potential is that? The potential for violence? How would you even know?"

"Because I *recognize* that look! I've seen it in the mirror, and it is grotesque and beautiful and I know, *I know* just how good it feels to do bad things to bad people."

"You want to be a killer." Matthew scoffs. "That's quite an odd ambition you have there, Will Graham. Killing people... no matter how good it feels, it's still an ugly thing. A hideous thing."

"I don't want to kill to feel good. That would make us no better than them. But we both know there are people out there who don't deserve to live, that life is wasted on them." Will approaches, almost toe to toe with Matthew. "And life is too precious to be wasted."

The psychiatrist recognizes the words, the belief - it's Hannibal Lecter as interpreted by Will Graham. Intriguing what Will has absorbed; now Hannibal yearns to dig into his lover's psyche, see how Hannibal has entangled himself into Will's brain. He's aware of his narcissistic tendencies, and to be able to break Will apart to see himself would be *glorious*.

The younger man continues. "Randall Tier wasted his life trying to be what he's not, and when he put on that bone suit, he became what he always wanted to be. He was finally himself."

"And I killed him. Not your best example, Will."

"But he was complete, at the end," says Will. His expression softens. "He cultivated the impulses of his nature and evolved and became. What if we did the same?"

Matthew barks out a laugh. "You want us to be what, murder besties? I'm not a murderer, Will!"

It's going to devolve into a circuitous argument if Hannibal does not step in. "Will, let me talk to Matthew alone for a moment. Go to the study."

Will stares at his lover, and then stalks away, slamming the heavy door to the study as if to emphasize his absence. Within seconds, an aggressive, fast-paced Prokofiev's *Suggestion Diabolique* rings out.

*****

Matthew feels like he is suspended on shadows over a chasm. It'll be so *easy* to just fall in. Now that he knows what's waiting down there, he has to admit that there is a certain appeal to the simplicity of Will's suggestion. The abyss is calling out, the sirens beneath beguiling, but they have *teeth* and they will rend him into nothing.

He's not worried at all that he can picture killing Julie so clearly in his head: he'd get her unconscious, tie a noose about her neck, and then as she wakes, he'd push her off the side of the bridge where he's secured the other end of the rope. She'd hang for her shame. Or perhaps the force of the fall would be so great that her head will be ripped from her shoulders as she falls.

Dr Lecter waits until his attention returns. "Would you like a drink, Matthew?"

"I'm not sure I should. I did drive over."

"Just a beer." The doctor disappears for a brief moment.

During the lull Matthew imagines actually wrestling with Will, strangling his best friend - or whatever Will Graham has become. It's not as satisfying as picturing Julie's death. For one thing, Will means a lot more to Matthew than his ex-girlfriend does. Matthew has no trouble admitting that. He has trouble admitting that he finds it terrible and damning and obscenely flattering that Will is willing to do all this for him. It also makes him feel used and dirty, as though someone has slept in his bed without his knowledge and wore his clothes without his permission. He feels *violated,* that his best friend can so easily twist their friendship for his own dark agenda.

"I apologize," says Dr Lecter after he returns and passes Matthew a tall glass of beer, "for Will's manipulation."

"You're not the one at fault," says Matthew. He sips at the brew. It tastes nothing like any beer he's ever drunk, and even has a slightly woody aftertaste at the back of his throat. "I don't... I don't hold you responsible for anything he did. You just did what he asked you to."

He's suddenly aware that he is alone with Dr Lecter. He's hardly ever left with the older man himself, come to think of it, and the realization sends pinpricks of a primal fear dancing down his spine. He believes Dr Lecter is dangerous - he has to be, because if Will has turned out like that it must mean that Dr Lecter has to be much, much worse - and Matthew remembers that he is alone in the room with a very deadly man. For a second Matthew imagines himself lounging on a hillock with a tiger.

"I am my own man, Matthew. I chose to let him lead." Dr Lecter takes a seat right beside Matthew and looks the young man in the eyes. In the light, Dr Lecter's eyes are almost dark red, and the wide mouth holds the barest hint of a smile. "I am profoundly glad that you saw through it."

Matthew has to look away from the doctor's scrutiny. "I just don't want to kill."

"You don't have to if you don't want to. But what Will has been trying to do is to get you to acknowledge that you are capable and willing to kill someone. Perhaps you are even desirous of such an action."

"I don't desire murder, Dr Lecter."

"Tell me again how you felt after killing Randall Tier."

Matthew feels the shudder from the pit of his belly dissipate through his limbs. He knows he can't lie, not to Dr Lecter; the man reads people like they are Dr Seuss books.

"Terrified," Matthew admits, and adds in a whisper, "and powerful."

"Are you terrified of me, Matthew?"

Matthew wants to say no, but that is a lie. He is *petrified* inside. All his instincts are telling Matthew to run, immediately, and not look back.

The doctor chooses that moment to place a hand on Matthew's shoulder. "I am not going to harm you."

Matthew feels a chill of relief dance down his spine. "I am afraid when you're so honest, sir. Makes me wonder if you'll kill me after all."

Dr Lecter leans back in his armchair, not answering the implied question. "Will loves you."

Matthew scoffs, "He has a strange way of showing it."

"No one can be fully aware of another human being unless we love them. By that love we see potential in our beloved," says Dr Lecter calmly, as though he's not discussing his boyfriend loving another man. "Through that love, we allow our beloved to see their potential. Expressing that love, our beloved's potential comes true. While you are not his beloved, he loves you, much more dearly than as a friend or even as a brother. He desires to see you come into your potential."

The corner of Matthew's mouth twitches. "So my potential is to be a murderer?"

The older man raises his brow. "You could be Theseus, killing the monster that hides in the labyrinth of society that preys on the helpless. Or you could be just another face in the gray crowd, mere vapors of existence."

"You once told me that out of the four of us, only Esther is an innocent. I know whom Will has killed, and I know whom I've killed. What about you, sir?"

"I was a surgeon," says Dr Lecter simply. "I killed people on the operating table. Or rather, I could not save them."

"That's not the same as killing them."

"It felt the same."

Matthew lets the words percolate inside. He wants to know more, and he senses that Dr Lecter is not being completely honest. Then again, who is, in this house?

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Hannibal observes Matthew, the young man all but immobile on his side of the seat. On the other side of the door, Will has long moved on to Bach. There is an intensity unsuited to the pieces, but Hannibal supposes WIll is trying to work out his irritation his own way.

Finally, Matthew says, "So. We're all killers, of a sort. Doesn't explain why Will wants me to kill Julie, however."

The psychiatrist leans forward. "I'm going to tell you a secret about Will. This is not a secret known to Will, but it is about him."

"What is it about him that you've not told him?"

"What Will has is pure empathy," says Hannibal quietly. "He's able to put himself in *anyone's* shoes and empathize with them. I've seen him empathizing so strongly that he loses himself in his incredible imagination."

"You've got to be kidding me." Matthew snorts. When Hannibal just looks impassively at him, he frowns. "You mean he can pretend he is anyone else?"

"He can imagine himself to be anyone else," says Hannibal. "He can feel what it's like to be me, or you, or Esther. He *reflects.* Why do you think he found it hard to get through high school? He kept reflecting everyone around him, and with the bullies, he reflects the aggression even more strongly. With you, he reflects protectiveness and brotherly love. With Esther, he reflects warmth and vulnerability. With me, he reflects love and desire for control."

"Still doesn't explain the whole wanting me to kill Julie bit."

"I suspect he lost himself in Randall Tier's mind, and is reflecting the worst of him - which was what he saw when Tier attacked all of you. I can usually bring him back, but not it has not been easy this time. He was in a state of distress when he met Tier, and so he may have empathized a little too strongly."

"Randall Tier tried to become an animal. Will isn't trying to be an animal."

"Randall Tier dug up the basest form of himself and made that his goal," Hannibal says, his tone calm and professional. It is not quite the truth, but close enough. "Will is doing that too: digging into the basest form of the people he reflects." He pauses again, and then smiles thinly. "Familiar, isn't it? I see the controlling and manipulative side of me magnified in him. And you - you recognized the darkest sides of you."

From the twitch in Matthew's jaw, Hannibal knows he has hit the mark.

The young man takes a long swig of beer. "That was before Esther. I've changed. I won't go back to what I used to be."

"You've put on a mask," Hannibal muses. The doctor allows himself to be lenient. "As I did, after the deaths of my family. But the mask is ever only a mask; it can be torn away by those who see the creature beneath."

Matthew's dark gaze flick up to Hannibal's face and it is disconcertingly akin to looking in a mirror, albeit twenty years younger. "I can't go back to that. Esther deserves a good brother. She needs a good brother."

Hannibal tips his head and peers over his shoulder at the closed door of the study. "Will has, however, neglected that. I think it is reasonable to exact some punishment for his transgressions, isn't it?"

The young man narrows his eyes. "You want to... you want to punish your boyfriend?" There is a look of disbelief and apprehension. "This isn't some kinky thing, right? I'm not tying him

up or, whipping him-"

"Bondage and whips do not feature in this scenario," Hannibal says with an amused exhalation. "I just need you to put the mask away for a short while. Let Will see what he nearly unleashed."

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Will fumes even as his fingers continue dancing up and down the keys. What should have come out elegant and delicate is distorted, and his beloved baby grand is suffering, the sound coming across strained and angry. With a flourish he ends French Suite No. 1 and nearly swears when he hears the light rapping at the door.

"It's your house too," he calls out, heart racing.

Hannibal comes in, with Matthew on his heels. Will has the strange sense of being weighed and judged, but his inner turmoil has yet to settle. He makes sure to shut the lid of his instrument carefully before he rises from the bench. Standing before them, he wonders what they have been talking about.

"Take a seat on the chaise longue, Will," says Hannibal.

Will lets his sneer show. "Are you gonna be giving me orders all night?"

"Yes." Hannibal's smile is razor-quick. "Tu priklausai man, remember?"

Will grits his jaw and makes himself relax. "Aš priklausau tau, yes." He sits and places his hands in his lap. "Now what?"

The psychiatrist turns to Matthew and inclines his head slightly. "You have had a difficult night. Please, sit beside Will."

Matthew does, sitting close to Will, their knees bumping. There's something slightly off about his best friend, Will notices, a strange arrogance to his carriage that wasn't there before, and a hawk-like cast to his eyes. For the first time since he's known Matthew, Will feels a twinge of fear.

Hannibal takes the chair behind the desk. It is as though he is distancing himself from the two young men. "Matthew and I were discussing earlier your deviation from your usual self, Will. It occurred to me that you may have fallen into the psyche of Randall Tier a little too deeply."

"I don't understand," says Will. He can't help the tension that grips his muscles. Something is very, very wrong here.

"You will. We need to exorcise that last remnant of Tier from you, and Matthew is the best person to do that." Hannibal leans back in his chair and smiles, his gaze completely detached and almost clinical as he takes in the scene.

Will shivers. "I'm not possessed, Hannibal."

"You're haunted by the specter of Randall Tier. *Sit down, Will,*" Hannibal orders. "Matthew, since I took liberties with your girlfriend earlier-"

"-ex-girlfriend-" Will cuts in snidely.

"-she was still his girlfriend when I was taking liberties. Do not interrupt me again, Will Graham," warns the older man. "As I was saying, I took liberties with Julie Benson. I feel I owe you an apology, Matthew."

Matthew tilts his head. "Apology accepted, sir."

"And in recompense, please feel free to do what you think should be done."

Will shoots to his feet again and whirls around to stare at Hannibal. "What the fuck are you saying?"

To Will's surprise, Hannibal only raises an eyebrow. "Why are you startled? Are you frightened? Do you not trust us?"

"I-" Will is robbed of words. His heart is thrumming with an unnamed emotion and his blood is singing with adrenaline. He takes a deep breath and settles his nerves. These two men are his lover and best friend. They won't hurt him. "Fine. Do whatever you want, Mattie, other than actually fucking me."

"I won't do that," Matthew drawls in a low voice and flicks a glance over at Hannibal. "I'm not suicidal."

Will swallows uncomfortably when his best friend places his hand on the back of his neck. His scalp tingles as Matthew weaves his fingers into dark curls, and he inhales sharply when he's dragged in for a kiss.

I can do this, he tells himself, and gives over to the sheer carnality. *I will do this.*

It's messy and sloppy and completely unlike how Matthew kissed him the first time. Will's hands fly to Matthew's tee shirt and grasps blindly at the thin fabric, shocked at how warm it is beneath. He's even more startled when he's pushed onto his back, the hungry, devouring kiss never breaking.

Matthew doesn't allow him the chance to speak. His teeth nibble on Will's lower lip, and then tear into it. The coppery taste of blood alarms Will. He gasps in pain, fingers clenching into his friend's clothes; Matthew takes the chance to thrust his tongue into Will's mouth. The kiss is devouring and hot and punishing, as though Matthew is claiming Will for himself.

As if Hannibal is not there, watching Will being pushed down and taken.

The involuntary cry from his throat is swallowed by the kiss. Matthew only laughs, a rumbling growl in his throat that sounds so unlike the Matthew Will knows and adores. His eyes snap open and meet Matthew's, and he is overwhelmed by the ferocity within the dark gaze.

You are beneath me.

You are insignificant.

*You are **nothing.***

It is too much for Will - more than the kiss forced on him, the sudden clarity of what he tried to pull out of Matthew shocks him out of his defiance and defenses. He shoves at Matthew's chest, scared by the other young man's strength; he thinks his friend's hands have turned to talons and are rending him apart into strips of flesh to be devoured. He pushes again, and again, but Matthew is stronger than he expected and his struggling does not free him.

In his anguish he cries out: "Hannibal, please!"

"Matthew, stop."

Matthew stops instantly and pulls away, getting to his feet. His expression is inscrutable.

Hannibal pads over. The moment he is within reach, Will latches on to him, burrowing his face into Hannibal's neck. His fingers clutch with desperate fervor at the older man.

"Don't throw me away," he begs in a voiceless whisper, harsh and despairing. Tears sting the corners of his eyes and he squeezes them shut. "Don't let others take me. Please don't let others take me."

"Of course I won't, mon amour." The doctor soothes Will with soft petting until Will stops trembling. "Tu priklausai man."

As Will breathes in Hannibal's scent, overlaid as it is by smoke and that bitch's perfume, he starts to calm down. Finally, he allows himself to resettle in the chaise longue. He feels translucent and only half-present; his head is hollow. Hannibal's pulse is slow and steady and he lets himself be lulled by its rhythm, the heart where he wants to reside and never leave.

"How did you feel?" Hannibal asks tenderly.

"Scared," Will replies, still shaken by his shock. He can't look at Matthew. "Threatened." He inhales deeply and licks his lips. He can still taste the blood there, the sting of his cut lip a striking reminder of what just transpired. "Betrayed."

"Do you understand why I allowed it to happen?" the older man asks again, gentle and caressing.

To make sure I know how violated Matthew felt when I tried to manipulate him. To understand that this is not the Matthew I want to know in my life. To make clear to me that a Matthew who is in touch with his darker impulses will not be within my control. Will swallowed and nodded hesitantly. "I get it now. I'm sorry."

Without asking Will to elaborate, Hannibal kisses him on the brow. "You owe Matthew the apology, not to me."

Having no choice but to face the music, Will shifts and turns to look at Matthew. He doesn't allow his gaze to move above his friend's chin. "I'm sorry, Mattie. I didn't mean to... I didn't realize."

He can't help the flinch at his friend's tentative touch, but he does meet Matthew's eyes. The look in his friend's face is so understanding and affectionate that Will is nearly brought to tears again, undone by the tenderness rather than the violence of what went on earlier. Matthew smiles apologetically.

"Now you know," he says quietly. "I can't be what you wanted me to be, because Esther deserves a good brother. She can't have a killer for her brother."

"I didn't understand. I'm sorry," Will whispers again, and this time he initiates an embrace. The two friends hold each other close for a long moment, until Will huffs out a short burst of laughter.

Matthew lets go and grins. "What?"

"I just apologized to you forcing yourself on me," says Will. "That is so fucked up."

"Language," Hannibal chides.

The pensive mood shatters. Matthew sighs and sticks his hands in his pockets. "I should be heading home."

"Mattie, you know I love you right?" blurts Will nervously.

"Yeah, but uh, kinda weird hearing you say it." Matthew scrubs at the back of his neck. "And especially after ripping your lip and sticking my tongue down your throat."

Will winces. He's still not fully himself yet; he wraps his arms around his middle and swallows down the shiver at the reminder. "Um, no offense, but I really don't think I ever want to kiss you again."

"Me neither," says Matthew with an exaggerated grimace. "You're pretty, but... It just wasn't right. And I'm sorry about the, um. Th-the lip. I was too rough."

"It'll heal quickly," says Will, and they both know he isn't just talking about his lip. An unasked question between them is answered: they will be all right.

Hannibal and Will walks Matthew to the door, where he then shook Hannibal's hand and says, "Thanks, sir, for understanding."

"I had a baby sister," says Hannibal. "I know how it feels when she's the world to you."

Will and Matthew hug once more before the latter saunters down to his beat-up Honda. At least their friendship hasn't suffered too much - if anything, Will feels closer to Matthew now, and he thinks it is the same for his best friend. Perhaps what they have is closer to a kinship than friendship.

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Once they return to their bedroom, Will turns to Hannibal and asks, "Why did he call you 'sir'?"

"I don't know," admits the doctor. "I like it."

"Of course you do." Will exhales and then insinuates himself into Hannibal's arms. "I'm sorry about all that. But why did you let me go ahead with everything?"

Hannibal kisses his boyfriend deeply, overriding all the reminders of Matthew from Will's mouth. He even licks the cut on Will's lower lip, making the young man hiss, and laps up what little blood there is left. "You can learn all kinds of things from your mistakes, my lovely mongoose. What have you learned?"

Will shifts so that his mouth is on Hannibal's neck, and his hands slide under his lover's burgundy shirt. He wants to burn the garment; it stinks of Julie. "I learned that you are a sadistic bastard."

"You already knew that."

"But to watch while another guy forces himself on me?"

"Matthew knew not to go too far." Hannibal threads his clever fingers through wild curls and breathes in the textured scents. "What else?"

"Why don't you tell me what I should have learned?" Will replies, mouthing at Hannibal's neck. His breath is hot on the doctor's skin and suddenly the ardor from earlier rushes into Will. He rubs his growing arousal against Hannibal's hip.

"You should have learned patience." Hannibal exhales heavily in amusement. With a deft twist and bump, he has Will sitting on the bed, looking bemused at how he got there. The psychiatrist smiles widely. "Coercion is seldom effective, mongoose. You took his agency from him, and he retaliated, as he should. If you had been patient, you'd have had him slitting her throat before your eyes. You rushed things, trying to force a conclusion."

"You don't seem too broken up about my failing to coerce him." Will scooted up the bed, and Hannibal crawled on to it towards him. Anyone else doing it may look ridiculous or like they're trying too hard to be sexy. Hannibal just looks predatory and dominating. Will feels his breath escape from his lungs and he reminds himself to inhale. "If I shouldn't use coercion, what should I have used?"

The older man brackets Will in with his hands on either side of Will's head, his knees on the outside of Will's thighs, and then he leans in with a dangerous smile. "Persuasion."

"How would you have done it?" Will drapes his arms over Hannibal's shoulders.

"If it had been me, I'd have bidden my time, and wait for her to trust me fully, before engineering an incident for Matthew to unveil her pretense. And then, I would not say a word

until after he has done the deed." Hannibal kisses him languorously. "After all, they do say that a good friend helps you to move, but a true friend helps you to move a body."

Will can't help it. He giggles, and when he sees the cheeky smirk on his lover's face, it sets him off on a giggle fit. Before long they're just holding on to each other and Will is trying not to choke on his laughter. In part it is a delayed response to the emotional turmoil from earlier, and in part because he thinks it's completely ludicrous that Hannibal just spouted off such a cliched line. He laughs and laughs and laughs, and Hannibal pulls the young man into his lap and kisses his cheeks, his eyes, the tip of his nose.

He can't identify the exact moment he transitioned from laughing to crying, but right now he's being rocked by Hannibal as his tears stream down his face. He still feels Matthew's surprisingly sturdy weight and wiry strength holding him down, and the recollection of Hannibal being *there* but not helping him.

"My darling Will, hush," murmured the older man, skating his hands down Will's back. "It's over, I have you now, I'll always have you..."

Will gulps in enough air to choke out, "You let him take me, you let him, you must have told him he could have me-"

"-no, mon amour, never, you are mine-"

"-you can't let me go, Hannibal, you *can't*, I'll die if I'm not yours-"

"-hush, mon rêve, I won't ever let you go. Tu es mon coeur, mon âme, mon être entier; tu es ma mort et ma vie." Hannibal presses a firm kiss on Will's forehead, and then on his mouth. "Never again will I allow another's mouth to touch yours in my presence. You are mine."

The sting on Will's lower lip grounds him. He inhales shakily and then goes limp in Hannibal's embrace. That is all he wanted to hear. Wrung out and exhausted, he closes his eyes, and wonders vaguely why he can hear Abigail's mocking laughter.

Chapter End Notes

Prokofiev, Suggestion Diabolique
Bach, the French Suite
Tu priklausai man: You belong to me
Aš priklausau tau: I belong to you
Tu es ma coeur, mon âme, mon être entier; tu es ma mort et ma vie: you are my heart, my soul, my entire being; you are my death and my life
(again, mostly Google translate, so let me know if something's wrong, thanks :)

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Will wakes up, it is already sunny outside. Dust motes float aimlessly in the slanted column of light streaming in from the window. He watches them dance - never touching, each with its own randomized path; he wonders if they had sentience, if they knew they were not alone, that all around them are dust motes similarly pushed and carried on currents of air.

He feels like he's one of them, drifting without purpose. His stomach is unsettled and queasy.

He hears Hannibal sniff absently from behind him and he smiles. Hannibal always loves breathing in Will's scents, except for when the young man has been out romping with the dogs. Will has to get up soon to let both Winston and Buster out, but at the moment he's warm and cozy and naked, and he has Hannibal's arm draped over his waist.

They're naked. Will can't recall if he took off his clothes last night - he can't remember much beyond the roller-coaster of emotions, from outraged to indignation to wariness to terror to lust to laughter to sheer desperation. He remembers crying in Hannibal's arms, begging his lover not to throw him into the arms of another. Looking over everything that has happened since Randall Tier, Will wonders why he didn't see it sooner. Then again, he was living it. All he has done stemmed from fear. He has been so *afraid* to lose Hannibal and the life they have built that he nearly wrecked it. What if Matthew had died? What if Matthew dug enough secrets from Hannibal to bring the law down on them?

Hannibal must have seen, Will reasons, and carefully turns around to face his lover. It was not merely an apology Hannibal made to Matthew last night. It was a punishment. There is a deeper reason - there always is, with Hannibal; the man does nothing without three or four reasons even if it seems spontaneous initially. Will has no idea how that incredible mind works. At every juncture when a major decision has to be made, what gears turn behind the fathomless burgundy eyes? How does Hannibal weigh his options in the blink of an eye?

What was Hannibal punishing Will for last night? He mouths at Hannibal's jaw and thinks.

The motion wakes Hannibal, who blinks his maroon eyes open lazily and smiles. "Hey there."

"Hey yourself," says Will. His mouth is sour and foul-tasting, and he wrinkles his nose when he senses his own breath.

Hannibal's smile turns to a knowing smirk, but he kisses Will anyway. The younger man pushes Hannibal to lie on his back and shimmies down the doctor's body, straddling his legs, until he can bend and mouth at Hannibal's cock.

"I won't do a lap dance," Will murmurs, "but I'd like to suck you off. May I?"

"Won't say no to that," Hannibal slurs, peering down at Will.

He is beautiful like this, Will considers, his fingers stroking his lover's cock until it starts to fill out. Has Hannibal always resembled a lion on the veld? The curls of his chest hair have gone mostly gray; Will runs his free hand over the man's broad planes and teases dark nipples. The events of last night seem to have evaporated, leaving nothing but a faint shadow of their existence. He shifts and lowers his mouth to Hannibal's cock, licking slow, wet stripes up its length.

The rumble of pleasure from Hannibal's diaphragm sends thrills into Will's loins. Even after so long, making Hannibal vocal is still one of Will's strongest turn-ons. The doctor prefers to take control and usually can take Will apart with ease - the fact that Hannibal is Will's only sexual partner gives Hannibal the advantage, Will has been conditioned to respond to him - so having the power to draw unintended responses from Hannibal makes Will feel powerful.

He sucks languidly, loving how Hannibal's erection hardens further in his mouth. He can feel the faint throb of the older man's pulse on his tongue (or maybe it is his own, thumping in his ears); the slight bitter-saltiness there. Hannibal smells wonderful here, musky and masculine and intense, and Will lets his eyelids flutter close to better focus on what he's doing. His cheeks hollow as he sinks further down, and his fingers dig into Hannibal's thighs.

As he pulls up, he hears the ragged moan he drags out of Hannibal and his own erection twitches. A stray thought catches his attention and he narrows his storm-blue eyes with dark mischief. He'll pay for this, probably, but it would be *such* a fun way to go.

Deliberately, he takes Hannibal's arousal into his mouth again, his gaze locked on Hannibal's face. Just as the older man's eyelids flutter shut, Will sets his teeth against the thin skin of Hannibal's cock, and exerts only the faintest bit of pressure. The sensation makes Hannibal's eyes fly open, startled.

Will pulls away again, his lips hovering over the slick, wet head of Hannibal's cock, and bares his teeth in reminder. "Now that I have your attention, I'd like you to tell me something."

"And what would that be, sweet Will?" asks Hannibal, voice low and thick; his gaze glitters with some unnamed emotion but Will can feel the amusement and wariness coiling about the older man.

"What did I do to piss you off so bad you had to punish me using Matthew?" Will inquires politely, and lets his incisors trail up the side of Hannibal's erection. His lips brush tantalizingly over skin and the doctor has to stifle a groan.

"Do you really consider this an appropriate time to discuss that?"

The young man shows his teeth again. "Yes. And don't lie to me."

"You made an erroneous assumption about us," Hannibal says, blinking slowly as Will ventures lower to suck his testicles into his mouth. "Mmmh. You assumed - Will, god - that I am willing to risk what we have for the fleeting pleasure of a kill."

Intrigued, Will let his tongue trail along the thick vein on the underside of his lover's erection. "I've seen you performing. I know you love the focus of creation."

"I love you more," says Hannibal quietly, factually. "You also assumed I didn't already have a plan B in place."

"How would I know? You never share your secrets."

"You know me better than anyone else in the world, mon amour," says Hannibal in a tone of mild reproach. "I won't risk us."

Will slides up to kiss his boyfriend on the mouth. "All right, enlighten me."

"You found someone to be a successor. I have someone set up to be a scapegoat." Hannibal returns the kiss, insinuating his hand between them to grasp their erections together to stroke. He smirks when Will hisses and arches into his hold. "It wasn't punishment, Will, just a reminder that you belong to me."

"Oh, is that what we're calling it?" says the young man, and suddenly grabs the doctor by the throat. His hand is callused from the years of working with wood and polish and heavy lifting; he squeezes, just enough to threaten. "I was fucking terrified, Hannibal. I really thought you abandoned me to Matthew. That isn't something I can let you get away with."

Hannibal flashes a shark-like smile and hooks his ankle around Will. In a flurry of motion, he's turned the tables: Will is pinned beneath him, breathing heavily. "What makes you think I can't? What do you intend to do about it?"

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Will wears stubble beautifully, Hannibal observes, but the scratches of his lover's chin over his inner thighs is going to be a problem. His momentary inattention allows Will to grab him by the back of his neck and pull him into a ferocious kiss. Hannibal expects it and isn't disappointed when Will tears into his lower lip with a canine. Blood taints the kiss and a flare of lust bursts hot in Hannibal's gut. With a grunt, Will rolls them over so that he's on top, and grabs Hannibal's wrists to pinion him to the bed again. The younger man is lighter than Hannibal, but this isn't the first time they've played rough, and Will has learned to use his center of gravity to gain better leverage on his lover. His thighs tighten around Hannibal's ribs, and he digs his fingers into the softer skin of Hannibal's wrists.

"I intend," snarls Will playfully, "a reckoning."

"Really." Hannibal bares a grin in challenge. "Show me how."

It's a lot less playful after that. They tussle, neither gaining the upper hand for long, and it's a wonder that they don't accidentally kick each other in the groin. Hannibal is cannier and twists Will's arm up behind his back to force a submission; Will pretends to give in, and the second Hannibal's grip relaxes he's turned the game around again. Sweat slicks their skin, making it harder to grapple, and the sheets are messed up beyond repair. Between the grabbing and wrestling, the two kiss and bite and occasionally allow their pelvises to rock

together, seeking a measure of release before they return to the sheer physicality of their play-fight. Their legs intertwine and part, their fingernails leaving reddened welts all over pale skin; they will have to hold off on swimming for the time being.

Somehow Will manages to slither around to sit on the small of Hannibal's neck and loop his arm around the older man's neck. He locks his hold - if he so wished, he could jerk backwards and Hannibal would be dead in seconds.

"Yield," he demands, voice caught between laughter and panting.

Hannibal exhales and goes limp beneath him. "I yield."

Will lets go instantly and Hannibal catches him into an embrace. They kiss messily and hungrily, and the younger man just slides his right leg between Hannibal's to hump against his hip. The psychiatrist chases his own pleasure, his fingers twining into Will's curly hair and the other hand squeezing his ass, seeking the young man's entrance to rub over it. Soft moans fall from Will's kiss-swollen lips, pressed into Hannibal's mouth. The doctor relishes the sensation of his cock trapped between their bodies, Will's rutting too urgent for Hannibal to give himself any relief from his hands.

"Hann-" Will gasps and comes first. His entire body tenses and arches into the curve of Hannibal's side, as though he wants to meld with the older man.

Warm slick spreads and smears over Hannibal's skin. For a moment, the passage of time feels suspended. Then Hannibal feels the sudden snap of release, low in his gut, and clutches his lover as he buries his face into Will's neck and comes.

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While Hannibal goes through the usual morning ablutions, Will disappears from the bedroom. The doctor wonders briefly what Will is doing out in the house without any clothes, but he's not worried that the neighbors will see his lover's nudity: there is no direct line of sight into his windows. Beverly called ten minutes ago about a corpse found in the uterus of a horse, and it sounded interesting enough to warrant a visit before the first appointment of his day.

Hannibal has just finished shaving, and his hands are busy putting away his razor and towels when Will returns. He sees Will in the mirror and smiles at him. "Would you like me to shave you?"

"No," says Will, and he steps up behind Hannibal to rest his chin on the older man's shoulder. In a flash his hand comes up to Hannibal's neck - and there is a knife, Hannibal's favorite, resting casually but firmly against his carotid artery.

"I have just shaved, Will," says Hannibal in a very calm tone. He meets his boyfriend's gaze in the mirror and is arrested by the strangely empty look in gray-blue eyes. "Will?"

"It felt like rape," the young man whispers. "*It felt like rape*, Hannibal, and it was my best friend forcing himself on me. All because you were pissed at me. Do you think I'll have

nightmares about Mattie?"

Hannibal wisely keeps silent. He can feel the edge of his knife on his neck, his pulse just below it, not yet racing; the alluring scent of his Will floods his olfactory system. This is Will at his most vicious and it is breathtakingly beautiful, this predator: the same Will Hannibal caught a glimpse of when Will contemplated suffocating Abigail Hobbs in the hospital, when he pointed the gun at Mason Verger's head, when he watched Hannibal carve up that pig's face and fed it to the dogs.

Unaware of Hannibal's admiring thoughts, Will scrapes the knife's edge over Hannibal's skin very gently, never breaking skin. "I understand you love to play your games, Hannibal. It is part of you. But do it to me again, and I will kill you. And then, I'll kill myself. Don't *ever* do it again."

"I promise I won't ever do it again," Hannibal murmurs. His pulse has picked up on the threat.

"Say you're sorry."

"I am very sorry about what transpired last night," says Hannibal in a low voice. "Please forgive me."

Will is warm where he's pressed up to Hannibal, and he kisses Hannibal on the cheek. The knife slides lightly over Hannibal's skin, leaving a fine crimson line, and then Will takes the blade away. "I'm going to be pissed about this for some time, just so you know."

Hannibal smiles wryly. "As you should."

"You're a great lover, Hannibal," says Will, returning the smile via his reflection, "and a huge dick sometimes."

The doctor touches the red on his neck and tastes his own blood from his fingers. "I won't disagree with that."

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“Now that's something you don't see every day,” Beverly says, her nose wrinkling. Alana Bloom stops outside the stall until she has pulled on the nitrile gloves.

Hannibal has to agree. The woman's corpse lies half-buried inside the dead horse's abdomen, the creature's intestines cushioning her from the dirty ground. Even in death, there is a sweetness about her features; Hannibal is curious what sort of woman she was.

Watching Beverly work, Alana makes a wry face. “It's almost as though she's been reborn.”

“Rebirth can only ever be metaphorical,” Hannibal remarks. “Yet that is perhaps what the killer intended... which in itself is strange.” He looks at Alana with a small smile. “I wasn't expecting to see you.”

“Beverly and I were out for breakfast when she got the call, I just tagged along.” Alana's shy smile makes her look like a schoolgirl in love. “Alas for those waffles.”

Hannibal quirks an eyebrow. “While I can't make waffles, I can make crepes and pancakes,” he says. “Come over tomorrow with Beverly. I'll make breakfast for dinner.”

“Sounds fantastic,” says Alana sincerely. “Sausages and eggs, and crepes for dessert?”

“As you wish,” says Hannibal with a courtly little bow.

Somewhere behind them, out of sight of the corpse and the horse, Miriam Lass is interviewing the owner of the stables.

“The mare was pining after her stillborn foal,” he says in a gruff, work-strained voice. He folded his arms and looks worriedly at the scene. “I came by to give her her feed, saw her lying on her side, and all the other horses hooded. Obviously something was fishy. So I got the vet in and that's what we found. I just... Which sick bastard would do something like that?”

The blonde agent thanks the man and enters the stall, where Price and Zeller are still taking photos. Zeller carefully tugs the woman out to fully lay on the tarp the vet placed earlier.

“Well, obviously she was killed before being put in there,” says Zeller.

Price nods in agreement. “She was scrappy, though. Look at her nails. She fought back.”

“Let's hope she got her murderer in there,” Beverly remarks, snapping off photos of the aforementioned nails. “I'll rush it. No one does this their first time round.”

“Why a horse, though?” Lass wonders aloud, crouching down to look at the animal's head. “I mean, there are easier ways to bury a corpse.”

“A horse is considered a noble creature in many pagan cultures,” Hannibal supplies. “Perhaps our perpetrator wishes to confer nobility on this poor woman's death.”

“A death is a death,” says Lass, almost dismissively. "Nothing noble about being put into a dead horse's uterus."

Jack Crawford chooses that moment to appear. “Dr Lecter, Dr Bloom, so glad that you've come.”

"Thanks for having me," says Alana. She and Jack never quite cross over the line to friendship; Jack has the tendencies of a bully, though he tempers it with good intentions and a strong moral code, but Alana casts herself as a protector, so they clash frequently in their treatment of suspects.

“Beverly apprised me of the situation and I assumed you'd want a profile,” says Hannibal with a brief, professional smile. “This is however quite out of my experience. I'm not certain who we are dealing with. This isn't violence, and certainly not mindless. I will need to think on it.”

Jack nods gravely. “Fair enough. I'll have Zee and Jimmy send you the autopsy report ASAP. Miriam, you're running interviews with me. Beverly, you're on trace.”

The Asian woman pulls off her gloves. “Which means I am gonna head back to Quantico, get a head start on the samples that we already have.”

Alana looks hesitant. “I need a ride back to my car at home.”

“I'll send you,” offers Hannibal. “I have an appointment in two hours, there's plenty of time.”

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In the privacy of the car, Alana asks, “I've made the reservations for you. Are you really not going to show me the ring?”

“No, I will not,” says Hannibal with a mock-stern look, the one he used on her when he was mentoring her. “Though there are days I'm tempted to just present it to him without making it an event. Maybe on a breakfast tray, or on the bathroom counter as he brushes his teeth. Take him by surprise, as it were.”

“Don't do what I did: putting it in her coffee. Thankfully she didn't gulp it down.”

Hannibal nearly slams on the brakes. He waits until they are at a red light, however, before he turns and regards her with unbridled delight. “Dr Alana Bloom. Are you telling me that you have proposed to Beverly Katz?”

Alana blushes a bright pink. “Yeah, guess I am.”

“This is abominable,” Hannibal declares.

“I was hoping for something along the lines of 'Congratulations',” Alana says slowly.

“You,” says Hannibal, “are definitely coming for dinner with your fiancee tomorrow, with your rings on, and we will talk about why hiding this particular development from me is not something a friend does. And you will have to sit through all the stories I will tell of your time at Johns Hopkins. Even the one with the photocopy machine and the feather duster.”

“Come on, Hannibal, not that one!”

“It's a punishment. You don't have a say in this.” Hannibal steers the car into the first lane and asks, "How new is this engagement?"

She smiles widely and says, "I did it two days ago, and it's still quite private. Only our families know and, um. I don't know if I want to make it a huge thing, or just sign the papers as Beverly suggested."

"You are not getting away without an actual ceremony, Alana Morgan Bloom," says Hannibal sternly. "While I don't expect to be your best man, I am volunteering my services to vet your catering, and perhaps your coordinator."

"You're going to intimidate everybody, aren't you?"

"Yes."

*****

Mr Curtis compliments Will on his work with the 1928 Chickering. “You are by far the fastest student I've ever taught.”

Will smiles at his boss. “Thanks Mr Curtis.”

“Why are you really here, Will?”

“What do you mean?” Will stands up and wipes his hands clean. Thankfully no one in the household that previously owned the piano smoked – tar and nicotine stain terribly.

“You're brilliant. You can go to college and be anything. Instead you're here, restoring pianos. Not that this is an easy job but...” The man stuffs his hands in his pockets and says, “You can do much more than this, son.”

“I... I never really thought I'd make it so far, Mr Curtis. I am a dropout, after all.”

Mr Curtis makes a noise of disapproval. “You can always take the SATs and whatnots without going to school, Will. Think on it. I'm not chasing you outta here. But think on it, eh?”

Will chews on the inside of his cheek. To be honest, he hasn't given much thought to the future. He's contented with just this – restoring instruments to their former glory – and yet even he can't miss the whispers that he's living off of Hannibal, that he doesn't deserve a man of Hannibal's caliber (which he privately agrees with). It does reflect poorly on Hannibal, Will thinks.

He's not seventeen any more. Unlike his younger self, he's far more assured now in his skin, far better able to keep up a facade of normality. With Hannibal, he never needs to pretend, but he's picked up a few tricks from his boyfriend that helps him in social settings.

While he's still busy musing, Danielle bounces over, her hair dyed electric blue again. “Hey Will. Do you ride?”

“Uh... ride what?”

“Horse.” She gives him the stink-eye, and then flourishes her cell phone. “Groupon! There's a stable offering horseback riding for four persons at a discounted price. You, me, Johnny, Caleb. This Saturday. How about it?”

“I'm in." Will scratches the side of his ear, feeling embarrassed. "Mr Curtis just said I should try to get in college."

Danielle shrugs. "Not a surprise. You're way smarter than any of us. Did you know, when you first came, Johnny didn't like you? Said you were just some rich kid pretending to get his

hands dirty."

"That explains the cold shoulder for the first four months."

"Well," says the girl, "are you gonna try? College."

"Not sure what I'll do. And I'll need to take exams and all that before I can apply, if I wanted to." He scuffs the toe of his shoe against the dull floor. "I knew I didn't want to go when I was seventeen, but I'm not seventeen anymore. But if I do apply for college... what happens to Hannibal and me?"

Danielle looks thoughtful, which is a very rare expression on her elfin features. Her dexterous fingers play an arpeggio on the polished surface of the Chickering. "Wouldn't he want the best for you?" she asks eventually.

"He always does." Will sighs and slumps against the piano. "I want the best for him too."

"Discuss it with him then," says Danielle, her perkiness returning to her. "After all, communication is key in a relationship."

*****

Will knows he can't bring up the topic with Hannibal yet. He's still sore about the whole thing with Matthew - if he is any less secure about how deeply Hannibal loves him, he might have felt betrayed. As it is, Will just wants to kick him in the nuts. Hannibal likes his mind games, Will understands, and in this instance Will just happened to play into his hands. He has learned much about psychology over the past few years, reading his boyfriend's subscriptions and assorted books; Hannibal feels love in a way different from other, regular people, and thus shows it differently. Last night was more a coda to whatever game the doctor played out in his mind than an actual betrayal of Will's trust.

He wishes he's ready to calling Matthew, but he still feels slightly queasy thinking about him at the moment. Matthew would make a fantastic murderer. Though Will had fought hard, Matthew never wavered in his resolve, and there had been no sign of agitation. True signs of the nurse's capacity for violence.

Mikolaj is currently in Barbados with his newest girlfriend and, in any case, isn't the best counselor. Will considers chatting to Mrs Komeda, but she's away on a business trip and he doesn't want to become too friendly with her. She's Hannibal's friend, not his own.

He should talk to Beverly to get her perspective. She gives great advice.

It's an odd friendship between them. Beverly knows that Alana used to have a crush on Hannibal; Will is aware that Beverly also knows that Will knows about the former crush. However, there is history between Hannibal and Alana Bloom, which neither Beverly nor Will can erase, so sometimes the FBI agent and Will end up spending time together commenting and complaining about their psychiatrist partners. It's great that someone empathizes with Will, to a degree: Alana, apparently, over-thinks everything in her relationship with Beverly, which sometimes happens with Hannibal.

While the doctor never analyzes Will to his face, Will knows that Hannibal can't turn off that part of his mind (unless they're having sex, in which case Will usually is able to command Hannibal's full focus on whatever they are doing). So discussing such a major decision with Hannibal isn't good for Will's as-yet-undecided mind; he wants to weigh it out first with someone else before going to Hannibal for a deeper, franker debate.

There is still the matter of the ring sitting in his drawer in his study. Its presence calls out to Will daily and every night, Will is tempted to pull it out and present it while they are in bed. He's waiting for their anniversary to make it special - Hannibal's love for theater means that Will is going to make it truly special.

If - no, *when* they're engaged and possibly married, will Hannibal want Will to go to college? Or is Hannibal going to prefer that Will stay close to home?

*****

"Yeah, Will?"

Will doodles on the wall before him. "Free for lunch? I'll spot."

"I am a grown-ass woman and I earn more than you do. My treat. Thirty minutes from now at Hallidays?" The agent sounds distracted; she's possibly waiting on some test results.

"Okay." Will exhales and lets his shoulders fall. Too many decisions to be made; he wishes he can just focus on one thing at a time, but life isn't so nice as to deliver only one problem after the previous one is resolved. Julie Benson is still a problem. Will's skin crawls and his stomach sours whenever he thinks of her, still out there walking and talking after cheating on his best friend and calling Esther a retarded child.

Abigail Hobbs steps forward from a doorway. "You are a psychopath, do you know that?"

"And you're a figment of my imagination, do *you* know that?" Will snaps from under his breath. Oh joy. More hallucinations. He wishes he can be more normal - being able to imagine these people to such painful detail is annoying. He hasn't been to see Abigail since the abortive Christmas visit, so this is as he remembers her at eighteen years old. "Get away from me."

With a little smirk, Abigail wanders around the room. "Oh no, I'm under your skin right now. Feeling violated, Will? Or maybe you are identifying with the girl who loved a murderer?"

"Your dad was a sick and jealous son-of-a-bitch who couldn't accept that his child is growing up."

"And killing and eating rude people is just so sane," says imaginary-Abigail. She flicks her long hair over her shoulder, displaying the cut on her neck. "You're as damaged as I am, except your damage is all inside."

Will ignores her last barb - his own mind is turning against him, how perfect - and goes back to work. He plays Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2 on the Chickering, taking mental notes

on the keys that are still sour.

"Do you perform?" someone asks, breaking Will's concentration.

Will glances up to see a plump man with a ruddy expression standing nearby. "Uh, no. I'm just an employee here."

The man smiles kindly and nods. "That was a beautiful performance. The Hungarian Rhapsodies are not casual pieces."

"Thank you." The young man blushes. "Um, can I help you?"

"Yes, actually. I'm looking for Mr Curtis." The man offers a name card. "I'm Dr Barres, from the School of Music in the University of Maryland. I've seen you play before, I think... You look familiar. And you're self-taught, or were."

Will blinks and takes the card with a thank-you. "You can tell?"

"Your fingering isn't conventional."

Just then, Mr Curtis came out from his office. "Jason! Good afternoon. Will, if you're heading out for lunch, grab me a club sandwich and a hot coffee."

"Yes boss," says Will with a grin. "I'm going now to Halliday's."

"Oh, then add in an order of the potato wedges, hold the salt."

*****

"But do you want to attend college?" asks Beverly, picking another from the small mountain of potato wedges they have ordered for lunch - Halliday's makes the best - and dips it into spicy salsa.

Will makes a moue of indecision. "I had really... I was really bad with crowds when I was seventeen, so I decided not to attend, you know, avoid the whole 'psychologically stressful' thing. I still don't *like* crowds, but I'm better now at dealing with people."

"I think you should go," the agent says. She signals for the waitress to top up their water glasses. "You're smart, I know you are. And you don't have to go far from Hannibal since we have fantastic universities in Maryland."

"Yeah." Will takes a deep breath. "I suppose that's what Hannibal would say too. I could commute; I do drive, after all."

Beverly grins. "He can return to tutoring you, can't he? I know he coached you for two years after you two shacked up."

"He's a very exacting teacher. My writing improved so much - and English is his third language!" the young man says in mock outrage. He grins and folds his arms over his belly. "Yeah... Guess I'd talk to him about it."

Beverly bounces in her seat. "You gotta let me know what you're going to major in. I miss studying - seminars and workshops just aren't the same."

"You're a nerd."

"Hell yeah," says Beverly with a laugh.

"So what was out there this morning?" Will asks idly.

"Dead woman in a horse," says Beverly. "Tattlecrime already has an article up."

"I'm not contributing to their page count," says Will with a snort. "The new guy is as rude as Freddie Lounds ever was, Hannibal says. Apparently they saw us out at a club and then claimed that he was pimping me out, all in 'journalistic language'."

"Hannibal could sue for slander."

"Hannibal thinks it's hilarious," Will grouches. "I don't even know why I love him, he has a crappy sense of humor. He likes *puns*, for crying out loud."

Beverly smiles with manic glee. "Ooh, this is juicy info. I am so going to rag on him when I see him next. Speaking of, I gotta get back, the autopsy report should be ready."

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Hannibal is poring over the autopsy report - a starling in the chest, how *creative*, he should have been there for that - when Will creeps up on him and hugs him from behind.

"No knife at my neck this time?" asks the psychiatrist, planting a kiss on his boyfriend's cheek.

"Only if you ask nicely," says Will. He peers at the notes and wrinkles his nose. "A bird in the ribcage? What, was the killer giving her a heartbeat?"

Hannibal hums and turns the page. "Every civilization, at one point or another, has thought that birds carry the souls of dead people into the heavens."

"Someone who knows his way around horse anatomy and has the ability to put a bird into a dead woman and not have the bird suffocate to death... Interesting fellow," Will remarks. "But you may be reading too much into the spirituality of things. Most folks don't know as much about all these esoteric stuff as you do."

"You could be right." Hannibal sets aside the papers and make space for Will on his lap, and the young man takes it. They share a few sweet kisses. Hannibal smiles. "What's on your mind?"

Will dithers for a few seconds before he blurts out, "College. As in if I ought to try for it."

"You'll certainly get in to any university you want," says Hannibal, nosing at Will's curls. "But why the sudden interest?"

"Not so sure about being able to get into any university I want, but thanks for the vote of confidence. Mr Curtis asked me why I wasn't in college since I'm so bright and all, and I got to thinking." Will trails his fingers over Hannibal's forearm. "And I'm not sure about it yet. Anyway, next Saturday I'm going riding with the guys from work. Is riding hard?"

"I can make so many jokes from that alone," Hannibal points out.

"Your jokes are terrible. Thank goodness you have mad skills in the kitchen and in bed."

"It's not that difficult," says the older man, letting the jibe about his sense of humor slide. "Most of the work is done by the animal. I've invited Beverly and Alana to dinner tomorrow evening, by the way. Alana has proposed to Beverly."

Will jolts upright, nearly hitting Hannibal on his nose. "What? Beverly didn't mention it to me over lunch! That woman is a thing of *evil*."

"She did give you that set of silicone cock rings for your birthday..."

"My point stands."

"You can tease them tomorrow evening then. Now get off my lap, I need to get dinner started." The psychiatrist squeezes Will on his ass. "Do you want to use her present tonight?"

Will grins mischievously. "On you? Hell yeah."

Chapter End Notes

Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The investigation turns up little on Sarah Kramer, the woman who was sewn into the womb of the dead mare. Outside of her place of residence and work, she has had a bland existence. The bit of dirt in her throat, however, points them to a site not too far from the stables, and there they locate sixteen other dead women, all brunettes, all living by themselves, all buried alive. Beverly is livid that no one noticed the pattern in BPD, and Jack is even more furious than Beverly that seventeen single women have died, right in their backyard, and they are only discovering this now.

Hannibal isn't too concerned about the case. He gives the team a profile (psychopath, misogynistic view of women, inflated sense of self, meticulous and fastidious, sadist but not willing to dirty his hands) and lets them busy themselves with the rest of it.

He has other worries, like the sudden appearance of college brochures. Will has a bad habit of leaving his reading where he last opened them, and all these are reminding Hannibal that his boyfriend may be thinking of venturing away from their calm cocoon of domestic bliss.

To add to his internal stress, practically everyone who hears of Will's vague intention of furthering his studies is encouraging him to do so. It is as though the universe itself is conspiring to rip Will from Hannibal's side.

Beverly and Alana had been unequivocal in their support of Will attaining academic brilliance, but this is understandable, since Beverly is, as she proclaimed, "a science nerd" and Alana is a professor. Hannibal also had to refrain from planning a dish around Mr Curtis; he had good intentions and is too good a pianist to be wasted. Also, Will would probably be annoyed if his boss ended up on his plate.

Jack Crawford also approved, having heard last night when he dropped by to discuss the profile with Hannibal and saw a brochure for Georgetown on their coffee table; he probably thought some distance between Hannibal and Will is going to allow Hannibal more time to assist the FBI.

Logically, Hannibal knows this is not really an issue; Will isn't going to abandon him just because he wants to attend college. Yet, the heart is a willful thing, and the doctor is dismayed to realize he is, in some ways, much like the common human swine after all.

He confides in Alana on Friday that he feels separation anxiety over something that hasn't yet been decided. "I know that it is good for Will to go, but I do not wish for what we have to change."

"Nothing endures but change," Alana says. "You told me that."

"Heraclitus did," Hannibal corrects. "And knowing a truth doesn't change the pain of it."

"Painful endings usually mark new beginnings."

"And if his new beginnings do not include me?" Hannibal hates that he sounds so clingy and needy, but there is little need to dissemble, here in Alana's office in Georgetown. Hannibal exhales and smiles wryly at Alana. "I'm sorry. I came for advice and now I am rambling."

Alana shrugs off the apology. "I'm your friend, Hannibal. Listening to your woes is part of the deal."

"I shall remember that. At the moment I shall put aside my matters and attend to yours," says Hannibal. He sighs again. "I am not used to feeling so much anxiety over so amorphous a matter."

"I think you already know what you'll do," says Alana with a sweet smile. "You'll propose, he'll accept, and then he'll attend college nearby. No one's saying he has to head across the Atlantic, Hannibal. He can always commute."

"Put in that way... I wonder why I'm fretting."

"Also, since you're here, I'm wondering if you'd like to collaborate on an article?"

"Oh? Do you have a subject in mind?"

"Not yet," Alana admits. She wrings her hands and shuffles the papers on the table before her. "I'm hoping for a distraction from the stress of planning a wedding. *Preparing* to plan for a wedding. Writing an article will help me do that."

Hannibal grasps her hands in his right. "You'll feel burned out if you try to do everything yourself, Alana. Find a reputable planner and have him or her do the hard work."

"At least then I'd look forward to the honeymoon," the brunette quips, and then buries her face in her hands. "Oh God, I'm not ready for this, am I? What was I thinking when I proposed?"

"That you love her very much, and want to make sure she knows that you are in this for life," says Hannibal, and feeling as though Truth has slipped from his lips on purpose without engaging his brain. He mulls over the morsel, and feels the beginnings of relief soothe the agitation of anxiety.

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"Is this adequate attire for horseback riding?" asks Will on Saturday morning. He's in a forest-green tee shirt and faded jeans; Hannibal's fashion sensibilities have not rubbed off on his lover yet.

Hannibal nods and serves up the eggs. They have had a good morning - Will woke to Hannibal's tongue pressing into him, sleepily reminded Hannibal that he had a riding session, and finally woke up enough to fuck the older man so hard that they roused the dogs outside in

the backyard. It is the best kind of mornings, Hannibal thinks, still feeling contented and adored from Will's lustful manhandling earlier. they take breakfast out to the porch.

Buster is already bouncing about, eager to get his Saturday morning sausages, and Winston is staring at his buddy with a disdainful expression. Of the two, Hannibal prefers Buster's obvious affection; Winston behaves very much like Will's guardian.

When they first rescued the mongrel, Winston had mistrusted Hannibal deeply, sometimes inserting himself between the two lovers. It took no small amount of bribery, training, and some unorthodox scent marking for Winston to accept that Hannibal is Will's mate - Hannibal smirks faintly, recalling with perfect clarity how he had smeared his semen down the back of Will's ankles after they had sex in the downstairs washroom, and how Winston had circled them both for nearly an hour, confused and befuddled on why his beloved Will smelled like the interloper.

"You've got a wicked expression on your face, Hannibal," says Will dryly. "What evil plan are you hatching?"

"No evil plan. Just a recollection."

"Hmm. Anyway, I was wondering if you're up for going to Zodiac tonight." Will tosses a bite of sausage to Winston, and then to Buster, before eating his own breakfast.

Hannibal frowns faintly. "What is your purpose for going there?"

"We've been seen leaving with that bitch once, so another appearance will assure people we're there for the... ambiance. And I'd like to play, just you and me, without that bitch to sour my mood." The epithet is uttered with complete neutrality, as though that is Julie's actual name. Will tilts his head and smiles invitingly. "I have heard that role playing enhances sex lives."

"For certain people, yes," says Hannibal. He runs his fingers over the back of Will's left hand, feeling the fine bones and veins. Then he turns the hand over and traces the lines in Will's palm, the calluses on the fingertips. The contrast so like Will himself - seemingly fragile, and yet incredibly strong within. "You may be too tired though."

"We're not there for the whole day, Danielle's Groupon voucher is only valid for ninety minutes." Will hums in pleasure over the eggs.

Hannibal considers, then nods. "After dinner then."

*****

Will doesn't realize how *huge* a horse is until he's staring one in its mouth. It harrumphs at him and makes him jump back, a little.

The stable hand, Greg, grins broadly, his teeth almost glowing in his dark face. "Bertha's a good one. Not nervy. Come on, round this side. Don't get behind horses - when they're

nervous they kick. One of the workers got kicked in the head, came back with his brains kinda scrambled."

"That's not reassuring," says Will. He is helped into the saddle and he takes hold of the reins nervously. "This is, um. This is much higher than I ever thought it'd be."

"Nice, ain't it?" says Greg, misunderstanding Will's concern. "Come on. All you need to do is hang on tight, don't squeeze with your knees, and the horses will follow me."

"Why is that area roped off?" Johnny asks, pointing at a stall.

Greg makes a face. "One of the animals died. There was something weird about it, so the police are investigating."

The four of them are led out slowly, Caleb in front of Will and Danielle behind him. The only one out of them who has ridden is Johnny, and he's smugly getting his horse to walk without any guidance from the stable hands. Greg hops up on a brown one waiting in the paddock - Will supposes he's to say the horse is chestnut instead of brown, but it's silly to differentiate that way - and then Greg leads the four of them out. Will just hangs on as instructed.

It's quite an experience, having a creature so obviously powerful carry him about. He can see why there are so many innuendos about riding, and he's certain his pun-loving boyfriend will have a lot to say later tonight. The view is fantastic too - it's shading into autumn, and the trees are beginning to fruit. The horses shake their tails to chase away some flies, and there is a deeply animal scent to the entire experience that isn't pleasant, but somehow still pleasing.

Will thinks Hannibal will enjoy sniffing all over him later. The man has an olfactory addiction to categorizing Will's scents, especially after he tries a new activity. Will bets anything that there is a perfume room in Hannibal's memory palace, full of delicate hand-blown glass globes, perhaps, or tiny painted antique snuff bottles arranged against a towering window to let light filter through them, and in each of these there will be a specific scent that Will has borne on his body.

Hannibal once tried to teach him the memory palace technique, but Will found it disorienting, because he can picture the places so vividly that it became almost more real than the actual rooms he was in. Now his memory takes the form of their study, only now each book is a specific memory, and opening one will show pictures that turn to scenes for Will. It works for him - he can recall with perfect clarity their first kiss, on the shore of the stream behind his former home (torn down and cleared, thankfully); the tiny white pebble he gave Hannibal that afternoon is still on the bedside table, gleaming beneath the lamp in a tiny velvet-lined amber box.

He makes a mental note to come out again with Hannibal. The air is becoming more crisp, and there is a redolent richness to the colors and the sounds around him. Greg doesn't talk much; Caleb and Johnny are chatting about baseball or basketball, Will isn't sure which, and Danielle is content to just ride and take photos with her cell phone.

They have circled back to the stable and returned the horses when they hear a plaintive howl. Will frowns. "What's that?"

"Dunno," says Caleb. He's Danielle's cousin, a stocky young man with startlingly orange hair. "None of our business. Dany, you need a ride home?"

"Nope. I'm heading to Johnny's place."

"I'm going to check that out, no need to wait for me," Will tells Johnny, and leaves the stables.

*****

It takes him about twenty minutes to find the poor creature stuck in a ditch. It's a dog, just a puppy, really, with dark chocolate eyes and perked up ears on seeing Will arrive. The young man's heart melts, and then he hops down into the ditch. It's not that deep, but for a pup it is really an ordeal. Will wonders where its mother is - puppies aren't really suited to wandering freely where there are horses; the horses don't exactly look at where they put their hooves.

"Hi, hi, you have, um, you have my Boomer, there." A lean, scruffy man in a thin sweater does not look Will in the eyes as he comes forward. Will carries the puppy out of the ditch and hands it over to the lean man.

There's something strange about the way he holds himself, as though he's not quite certain where his limbs are, and thus he keeps his elbows tucked close to his ribs and his wrists rigid. That oddness, coupled with the half-shaven head and stitches still vaguely visible, leads Will to conclude that this is the guy which a horse kicked in the head. The guy may move strangely, but there is a tenderness to his voice for the puppy, which is now making happy wuffling noises. He finally glances up, and then his gaze skitters away instantly. Will is strongly reminded of himself as a teenager.

"Hi," says Will. He doesn't offer a hand to shake. "I'm Will Graham. That's Boomer?"

"Yeah, Boomer, yeah. He's um, he was the runt of the litter and now he keeps running out of the, running out of the shed. Thanks f-for saving him. I was getting worried about him. Getting worried about him." The cadence of his words is disjointed and fragmented, like he has barely managed to string up his sentences before they stumble out of his mouth. "I'm Peter. Bernadone."

Will smiles. "Hi Peter." There's an air of innocence about the other guy, for all that he is older than Will, as though the injury erased all traces of his past and has changed him utterly, given him a clean slate. Will likes him. Then again, anyone who takes care of injured dogs wins Will's favor.

"I have to go. Boomer's mama is frantic but I can't let her out, she's got a broken leg. Thanks." Peter bobs his head nervously, never looking in Will's eyes, and scuttles away, cradling Boomer like it is something precious to him.

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Hannibal finds himself charmed by the fact that Will seduces him into afternoon sex the moment the latter gets home. The young man comes into the study, still warm and sticky

from his expedition and probably smelling of horse and hay and the outdoors, and strips right in the study while Hannibal plays the Goldberg variations on his harpsichord.

"You know you want to," Will teases, sauntering from the door until he's right beside the instrument. "Come on, put that nose of yours to good use."

It is a marvelous thing to be loved by someone who knows you so well, Hannibal reflects, and turns around in his seat. "What do you intend for me to do with my nose?"

"Catalog my scents." Will drops to his knees, elegant and breathtaking in his youthful grace. He nuzzles at the inside of Hannibal's right knee, and murmurs, "Then make me smell like you again."

"I'd rather keep that for tonight, if you don't mind. I'm not as young as I used to be." Hannibal drags Will into his lap and inhales the heady fragrance of his favorite person. Beneath the animal musk, Will smells of sunlight and grass, and Hannibal licks slowly up the salty column offered to him. "You smell beautifully alive."

"Mm. I think I rather like riding." Will's mouth curls in a smug smile. "Quite the feeling to have a powerful creature between my legs, waiting to take direction from me."

Hannibal smirks. "I shall assume you meant riding in a non-coital sense, mon amour, or else this conversation seems quite out of place."

"Oh, I intend to ride you at a gallop tonight," Will whispers, as Hannibal skims his nose along Will's jaw and then his temple. "Ride you so hard till I wake the dogs and the neighbors. Till your legs buckle and and you come so hard in me, I won't be able to walk tomorrow."

"I like you riding too," Hannibal murmurs. His hands cradle Will's hips, and he tugs at an errant curl. "Take a shower and rest, mon amour."

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To Will's amazed amusement, he enjoys dancing. Even more surprising to himself is that he enjoys role playing. He likes putting on this other skin, this persona of 'Gray': there is a freedom in the other version of himself, in that brash, open sexuality that Will finds liberating. He can never picture himself doing this, *being* this. He lets his restraint fall away, and moves with the sinuous beat. It's slow and sexy, and he knows Hannibal is watching. There are strangers' hands on his waist, on his hips, drawing him close; the lyrics slide into his brain and *growl* with passion.

"I' m gonna rock you like a baby when the cities fall / We will rise as the buildings crumble / Float there and watch it all / Amidst the burning, we'll be churning / You know, love will be our wings / The passion rises up from the ashes / When the world ends..."

Will lets his head roll back to rest against the taller man he is grinding back against. No kissing at all this time; he ducks his head, allowing them to put their mouth on his neck, his shoulder, but his mouth is not for them to claim. Hannibal is a possessive man, after all.

They walked in together earlier, Will pressed into Hannibal's side, and they have been watched from their entrance to them settling in Hannibal's booth, to Hannibal letting Will join the crowd on the dance floor. The two predators have been aware of the scrutiny, and play up to it, Hannibal trailing his fingers through Will's hair and down the line of his spine, Will arching for more contact, almost feline in his demonstration.

Even now no one can mistake how Will is performing for Hannibal: pulling in one young partner after the other; pressing close but never doing more than touch; his hands skimming over bared skin or over muscled arms and chests; hips thrusting against another set of slim hips in a facsimile of actual copulation; never really breaking eye contact with the older man for more than a few seconds at a time. It's hot and sweaty and absolutely filthy, how he's picking up all their pheromones and scents, layering them over his own for Hannibal to pick apart later. He squeezes the ass of the young woman with dark pink hair and lets her kiss his cheek, turning away so she can't get his lips; he feels another rubbing broad hands over his chest, deliberately tweaking his nipples over the thin shirt he has on tonight.

"I'm going to tie you up like a baby in a carriage car / Your legs won't work cause you want me so / You just lie spread to the wall / The love you got is surely / All the love that I would ever need / I'm going to take you by my side / And love you tall, 'til the world ends..."

He smiles broadly at the attention. The Will Graham inside, the one who hates crowds, *hates* how it hems him in, traps him, how there are so many different motives and intentions and so many people all wanting, wanting, *wanting* is trying not to panic. But this version of him loves that despite their want, they can't have him. He belongs with Hannibal, to Hannibal, and all those who are interested know it. They desire, yet they can never possess.

It's a heady rush. He lets his gaze flick up again to their table, where Hannibal is sprawled with a drink in his hand, a smile on his lips, and an invitation to return to him.

Will thinks it's another skin the psychiatrist puts on, the indulgent older lover allowing his young boyfriend to play, a kitten with a ball of yarn that he can take away anytime. Utterly in control of everything Will does. Will is here, dancing, being touched by other people because Hannibal wants him to be - or at least that is the perception they are delivering.

In another time, in another world, Will might have been this sort of youth and Hannibal this sort of man.

As though they are psychically linked, Hannibal lets a smirk curve his mouth. He inclines his head and his fringe falls partly forward. Will likes him like this - looser, more relaxed; he even appears a few years younger than he actually is. The slate gray shirt suits him - Will takes in the faint heat coloring Hannibal's gaze as he follows Will's motions - it darkens the color of his hair and frames his leanness.

"We're gonna dive into the emptiness / We'll be swimming / I'm going to walk you through the pathless roads / I'm going to take you to the top of the mountain that's no longer there / I'm going to take you to bed and love you, I swear / Like the end is here..."

Unable to bear the need any longer, the young man leaves the dance pit and goes to his lover, weaving past people with nary a second glance. Their eyes search each other out through the

other people moving between them. There it is, that magnetic attraction: almost four years, and more to come, and Will wants this inexplicable draw between them to never, ever disappear.

Tonight is an excuse for Hannibal to feel in control again. Will has noticed that his boyfriend is starting to fray. While Hannibal has been hiding his dismay adequately, Will hasn't lived with the man for so long without being able to decode his body language. Hannibal is worried about Will and college, and has tried to hide his concern from Will to give the young man space to make his decision.

Nice to know that Hannibal isn't above anxiety.

He drapes himself over Hannibal, arms on the doctor's broad shoulders. The song has changed into a different one, and Will tunes it out in favor of drinking in his boyfriend's regard and slow kiss.

"Hey there," says Hannibal.

Will grins. "Hey yourself." He rests his brow against his boyfriend's and breathes in the intoxicating mixture of whisky and Hannibal's understated cologne.

"I've seen two associates so far," murmurs Hannibal, his fingers brushing dark chocolate curls from Will's damp face. "They are quite, shall I say, taken aback by my presence. And quite taken by yours."

"Mm-hmm. Flattery gets you everywhere," Will purrs. He knows he looks good in his black shirt, and Hannibal has helped him with his eyeliner again. Leaning in, he whispers against Hannibal's lips, "Wanna show them how it's done?"

Hannibal's wide mouth curves in a crafty smile. "Here and now?"

"We *are* role playing, aren't we?"

They kiss languidly, hungrily, putting on their own show. Hannibal's hands wander up Will's back, kneading at the young man's waist and shoulders, and then sliding up to grasp Will by his curls and tug his head back to bare his neck.

Will groans shamelessly as Hannibal sucks on his neck, just below his ear - that will show up tomorrow - and grinds his erection against Hannibal's abdomen. The older man smirks and then *bites*. Will arches his back and presses closer, almost blatant in his surrender. They are still clothed, and this isn't something the rest of the club hasn't seen, but there are a few who are watching who feel just a touch warmer.

When Hannibal lets go to grab his drink, Will rubs his cheek against the other man's stubble and then dips his mouth to pepper kisses along the side of Hannibal's neck.

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Hannibal lets Will shower affection freely over his neck and jaw while he sips on his whisky. When he raises his gaze, he sees an acquaintance passing by, and recognizes him as Mr

Haynes, one of Mrs Komeda's more persistent hangers-on, who has stopped in sheer surprise at seeing Hannibal in such a setting.

The doctor nods and nibbles on Will's ear, which gets the younger man to giggle and duck away. Will then sees the gentleman watching. Haynes is trying, and failing, to keep the shock from his eyes.

"Hi," says Will coyly, winding an arm around Hannibal's neck. From the gleeful expression on Will's face, Hannibal guesses that his lover has recognized Haynes as well. The young man rubs his cheek over the doctor's and says, "Sorry, sir, I'm taken."

Haynes looks embarrassed to have been caught staring, and moves hurriedly on.

"Maybe we should bring this home," Will says with a laugh, and steals the rest of Hannibal's whisky. He makes a face - he doesn't really enjoy hard liquor - and kisses it back into Hannibal's mouth. Their tongues slide over each other as the older man swallows, and Will shifts his hips.

Hannibal hums and licks a stray drop from Will's lower lip. "Yes, we should."

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Jack calls Hannibal the next morning, but Will gets the phone before Hannibal can reach it.

"Morning," Will rasps.

"May I speak with Hannibal please?"

"He'll call you back in ten minutes, Mr Crawford."

"I need to speak with him-"

"Mr Crawford, I don't want to get too graphic, but trust me *(dammit, Hannibal)* he is definitely indisposed at the moment *(quit it!)*, and he'll call you back in ten minutes." Will ends the call before tossing Hannibal's phone off the end of the bed.

The older man pulls away from Will's cock and laughs, his lips reddened and plump. His hair is a mess where Will has been gripping at the back. "I've never heard anyone speak to Jack like that," he informs Will. "I suspect I shall get quite a lecture later."

"You weren't helping, you monster." Will grins impishly. "I should have left it connected, let him listen to the good doctor blowing his lover."

"Very unprofessional, mon amour," Hannibal chides. He licks up his boyfriend's erection and swirls his tongue over the slit, before kissing down the shaft to nuzzle at the base, where his musk is dizzyingly intense. Will is making the most *fascinating* noises, trying not to thrust up. Hannibal hums as he licks back to the tip again and slides Will's cock all the way in so he can swallow around the head. The sound, the scent, and the sight floods Hannibal's senses in

the best way; he lets himself fall into the rhythm of his lover's pleasure. He strokes himself even as Will's hips make abortive little jerks up into Hannibal's hot mouth.

Precisely nine minutes later, Will comes with a choked cry down Hannibal's throat.

Immediately after, Hannibal calls Jack Crawford, all the while wearing a smug grin at his naked lover sprawled out on the bed.

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Jack very pointedly does not mention his first phone call. He has called Hannibal to accompany the agent on an interview to Blackbriar Stables where they found the first victim.

"A possible suspect, but I'd like you to suss him out first," Jack says, skipping the morning pleasantries. "A man called Peter Bernadone. He was employed by the stables, and is apparently still the go-to person when the horses are feeling twitchy but not ill enough to warrant a vet."

"He's living on the farm," Hannibal notes. "Lots of space to bury the victims, but the site where the last seventeen victims were found is almost twenty miles from here."

"Burying them here would be risky, there are plenty of people here coming and going at odd hours."

They come to a small barn and, when Jack knocks on the door, they hear a cacophony of howls and barks and assorted birdcalls from inside the building.

"I would suppose that would be an adequate alarm system," says Jack wryly.

"Come in please," a voice calls out, shaky but clear.

They go in - it's unlocked - and when they are inside, Hannibal's nostrils flare at the acute, overwhelming animal smell, so thick it's almost solid. The man they are looking for is sitting at a table, carefully bottle-feeding a kitten.

"Mr Peter Bernadone?" Jack inquires politely.

The skinny man nods but does not look at them directly. "That's, that's me. Sorry but I can't stop halfway, she's very fussy. P-please have a seat."

The stutter reminds Hannibal of Matthew in the early days of their acquaintance. Strange to think how far Matthew has come, far enough to recognize Will's manipulation and steady enough to deny his best friend. He wonders if Matthew and Esther are doing well, and resolves to call on them sometime in the coming week.

Peter Bernadone has the appearance of someone undernourished and uncared for; a sentimental, softer person might feel sorry for him. Hannibal is merely curious as to how he copes with so many creatures, and why he chooses to live like this. It's perhaps the strangest interview Hannibal has ever observed - Jack sits at the table and asks questions while Bernadone makes sure the kitten finishes its tiny bottle. When the animal is done, Hannibal

offers to carry it back to its mother in its cage. He sees that there are almost eight other kittens in there, which explains why Bernadone is bottle feeding one. The cat probably doesn't have enough milk for her kittens.

"Would you mind looking at a photograph?" Jack asks gently.

Bernadone flinches, and turns away, before stretching his arm out behind him for Jack to put the picture in his hand.

The way he takes the photo from Jack, and the way he can't look directly at it clues Hannibal in. "Did you get your head injury when you were working in the stables?" the doctor asks.

"Yeah," says Bernadone. "Kicked by a horse. Here. Boom."

"That is an atypical motor response," says Hannibal, retrieving the photograph from his unresisting hand. "Mr Bernadone's abilities to look and touch can only happen as separate events. It's aggravated by stress."

Jack lowers his voice, as though calming an agitated, spooked creature. "Are you stressed right now, Peter?"

"Yeah, I'm worried about the bird," says Bernadone nervously. He can't roll his 'r' properly; it comes out sounding like 'w'. Possible another side effect of the head injury. "I'm sad, I'm sad for Sarah, but I'm worried about the bird." His voice dwindles to a mutter. "Worried about the bird."

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"He knew the victim, and the animals involved," says Jack. His shoulders are stooped and weary; Bella's death some three years since has taken its toll on him.

"He is unlikely to be the killer," says Hannibal. "He knows who the killer is, and may have set things in motion for you to find him, so that he can point to the shadow that only he can see. But that may also mean that the killer has hidden his tracks so well that you won't be able to get enough evidence to put him away."

Jack shakes his head. "He still has to come in for what he did to Sarah Kramer."

"He is psychologically disadvantaged; this already weakens your case against the real killer."

"Still, once we have a name, it may be easier for us to construct a stronger case." Jack shakes his head and says, "Some days I wonder if I should not retire the field, leave it to someone more driven."

Hannibal smiles reassuringly "You still have plenty of drive, Jack."

"I wonder. At least I have people like Katz and Lass on my team Those two ladies are pushing themselves harder than any agent I have ever had under my supervision."

"I know Beverly is very angry about the women no one noticed were missing."

"Mm. I have her running most of this case, I'm taking more of a supporting role this time round. Lass is revisiting the Ripper cases. Fresh eyes and all that."

Interesting. I may need to set up my scapegoat soon after all. By now they have got to their own cars. Hannibal asks, "If you're feeling up to it, Jack, would you like to come over for dinner tomorrow after work?"

Jack beams. "Dinner at your place is always a pleasure, Dr Lecter. Oh, and do give Will my regards. Nothing graphic, fortunately."

Hannibal chuckles. "Of course."

Chapter End Notes

JS Bach: Goldberg Variations
When the World Ends - Oakenfold remix

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You're new."

Matthew looks up from collecting the meal trays. This isn't his usual duty, but four of the staff are down with the flu, so they are rather shorthanded. Barney is behind him, collecting the tray from their newest inmate, Miggs, who is abusive and chronically flings semen at the orderlies. Barney, being the big, kind guy he is, has Matthew dealing with the less problematic inmates instead.

He finds Abel Gideon staring avidly at him, and a frisson of warning skitters down his spine. It's not like the feeling he gets when he's alone with Dr Lecter; Dr Lecter may be dangerous, but he's rational. Matthew now finds himself wanting to be very far from here. Abel Gideon stands and leans against the far wall. He has a slight limp, as well as a keen gaze that sears like hot knives. Matthew swallows nervously.

"I don't recall seeing you around the first time I was here," Gideon drawls, cocking his head to the side. His voice is soft, almost hypnotic, and if Matthew isn't aware that this man killed many people brutally, he may have wanted to listen. "Someone like you would've stuck in my memory... what's left of it. Tssssst. Now *that* is going to bother me all day."

Without replying, Matthew averts his eyes and walks away. He wonders what Hannibal and Will may think of Gideon.

Gideon calls out from behind him, "I'll see you around then?"

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Esther is ecstatic that she has managed to teach Buster a new trick. She has him do it again and again and *again*, and every time he's happy to do it. Then she turns to Winston and tries to get him to play dead, but Winston is a stubborn dog.

"She's good with the dogs," Will says fondly. "Hope this makes up for the time I haven't seen her."

"She'll be okay." Matthew stuffs his hands in his pockets and hesitates. In a softer voice, he asks, "Are *we* okay?"

"Yeah." The other young man's cheeks are pink. "I'm, um, still letting go of the shock. Hannibal's helping. You're still my best friend, Mattie."

Matthew rubs the side of his neck self-consciously. "That's good to hear."

"Sorry to just drop by tonight without warning. I know you have a routine for Esther," says Will. He exhales and adds in a small voice, "I had to, um. I had to see you. To say that I'm sorry for what I tried to do."

"You're already forgiven." The taller young man shuffles his feet. After a couple of minutes, he says, "Sometimes, I think we are all damaged. You and me and Dr Lecter."

"Can't disagree with you on that."

"We don't see things the way most people do, I think. Don't feel the way most people do. Sometimes I believe I'm a psychopath."

"If I were anyone else, I may freak out," says Will dryly. "Good thing my boyfriend is Hannibal."

Neither acknowledge that Will's statement could be taken to be a reference to Hannibal's career and to Hannibal himself.

"You're possibly the only one who won't freak out." Matthew grins. "Esther wouldn't understand."

Will bumps him with an elbow. "I have an incredibly strong sense of empathy. I can understand nearly everyone. Except maybe myself."

"That's why you're going to marry Hannibal. He gets you."

Will blushes. "Yeah, he does. So, what's new at the hospital?"

"Abel Gideon. I've finally met him." The nurse chews on the inside of his cheek thoughtfully. "He talked to me."

"Don't talk *with* him," Will warns immediately. He runs his hand through his messy hair. "I still get chills thinking of that time when he disemboweled Chilton. That man is a bag of crazy, and it's the kind that burrows under your skin, like maggots in an infected wound."

Matthew thinks about it, and has to agree. Still, there's something intriguing about Gideon - the lack of remorse, for one. Amorality in a pure sense. The nurse wonders if it came about after his madness, or if it has always been a part of Gideon's psychological make-up. He says nothing, however, and watches his sister play with the dogs.

Finally Esther gets Winston to roll over, which merits a doggie treat, and that's when Will hugs them both goodbye.

"Come on, sweetheart, we have to clear your reading homework tonight," says Matthew, watching Will hurry his dogs into his car.

"If I finish early can I come out to stargaze?"

"Not tonight, sweetie. You know you have a spelling test tomorrow, and lack of sleep makes you careless."

"If the spelling is on constellations then I'd get full marks," Esther argues.

Matthew shakes his head. "Not everything has to be on astronomy."

"Why not?" she asks with a pout. She hates reading assignments, unless they are talking about stars or the legends behind the stars.

Her brother shrugs. "I'm not smart enough to answer that."

"Will said we're gonna meet on Saturdays again, right? Like we used to before Julie?"

"Yes." The young man ruffles his sister's hair affectionately. Dr Lecter will be there too, and oddly enough, that thought soothes the strange curiosity inside Matthew to get to know Abel Gideon.

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It is Jack Crawford who welcomes Will home from his evening visit to Matthew and Esther. "Hannibal invited me over for dinner. I hope you don't mind."

"Why would I? You are always welcome in our home, Mr Crawford," says Will, shedding his boots on the patio, having come in from the back gate. "How's things?"

"Things are well," says Mr Crawford.

He looks more careworn now, Will notices, as though whatever used to light him up in the past is gone. That is more or less true - Mrs Crawford, God rest her soul, had been an elegant and gracious lady that Will had quite honestly been awed by; she had been Mr Crawford's support and anchor. Now that she has been dead the past couple of years, Mr Crawford is showing signs of weariness.

Will excuses himself to take a shower and dress for dinner. He usually doesn't bother if it's just him and Hannibal, even if Hannibal insists on wearing his three-piece suits all the way until bedtime instead of changing out like a normal human being the second he is home. At least his romance with Hannibal hasn't changed Will that much, even if the clothes Will buys now are of better material and make. Nothing near as extravagant as Hannibal's, of course.

It's humbling to think that Will may end up like Mr Crawford some day. The young man isn't so naive to believe that Hannibal and he will pass together at the same time in a peaceful sleep. Very likely, Will is going to mourn Hannibal Lecter for the rest of his days. The reminder of their age difference always brings this sad knowledge to the front of his consciousness. It is an unpleasant fact, but Will has to accept that it is never going to go away.

His heart aches with how much he loves Hannibal, and in anticipation of how much pain he will have to endure once Hannibal is gone. His fingers clench on his left forearm where the faded scars are, and swallows down the surge of emotion.

He will propose to Hannibal on their anniversary, and he will become a Lecter, and he will love and adore the doctor so fiercely that no one, *no one* will ever doubt that Will Graham is Hannibal Lecter's.

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"You've got the wrong guy," Will informs Hannibal and Jack Crawford over dinner after Jack accidentally brought up the case and Bernadone's name. "Hannibal says he was nursing kittens. No way someone like that can be that coldhearted as to systematically kill seventeen women by burying them alive."

Apprehending mass murderers is an unusual topic of conversation for their table, but Hannibal is distracted by Will's freshly-shaven cheeks, as well as that sea-blue shirt and slate gray jacket. Obviously Will has made the effort for their guest.

Said guest frowns at his host. "Hannibal, you're not supposed to reveal case details."

"The seventeen women I found out from the news, and Hannibal didn't mention names, just that this guy was feeding a kitten while you questioned him," Will interjected. He smiles apologetically at Jack. "But if you didn't want to talk shop, you shouldn't have brought more files for Hannibal. I saw them on the couch earlier."

The agent holds up his hands. "Guilty as charged. We shall put the case aside then."

"As we should," says Hannibal, serving up the main course. "No need to mix business with pleasure. Magret de canard. Seared duck breast with honey, orange and thyme, served medium rare, with a side of fried plantains."

"Mm. This smells wonderful." Jack's compliment is sincere, and Hannibal smiles at it. "I do wonder how you two manage when you're not feeling up to the task."

"We suffer the indignity of takeout," Hannibal reveals with a teasing sidelong glance. "Thankfully, I am seldom ill."

"Hannibal's been trying to teach me to cook," Will tells Jack in a confiding manner. "His argument is that fine food doesn't mean hours in the kitchen. I'm not convinced though."

Jack smiles paternally. "And has he been successful?"

"Nope," Will says, smirking at Hannibal, who throws him a scolding look. "I found a fantastic cook for my boyfriend, so I have absolutely no need to do any cooking."

"One day," says Hannibal, topping up their wine glasses, "I shall lock you in there until you serve up a proper five-course dinner."

"As if you won't be fretting about my trashing your kitchen."

"He's a good sous chef, but other than fish, he refuses to try any other dishes," Hannibal says in an aside to Jack, with an air of long-suffering exasperation.

The agent grins. "My mother and my wife were both terrible cooks. I learned the rudimentary skills in order to survive. Nothing on this scale, of course, but I make a mean steak-and-kidney pie. And lasagna is simple to master."

Will spears a bite of plantain. "You should join us for dinner more often. Hannibal loves cooking for guests, and cooking for two is as easy as cooking for three."

Hannibal concurs. "It'll be nice to have your company, Jack. After all, you did introduce us. I have not really thanked you adequately for this."

The stout man nods and smiles. "I assure you, when I suggested that you hire Will to maintain your yard, I wasn't suggesting this."

"And yet, without you, we might never have met," says Will, directing a fond glance at Hannibal. "And that is something unbearable to think of."

Hannibal merely smiles, and eats.

*****

Later that night, after they have settled in, Will asks, "Was it okay, me inviting Mr Crawford for more dinners?"

"This is your home too, Will," Hannibal points out. His knuckles brush over Will's jawline. "And I do think of Jack as someone close to a friend."

Will smiles and his eyelids flutter shut at the gentle caress. "He doesn't like being here. I think we remind him of his late wife."

"Yes, we do." The doctor presses a goodnight kiss to his lover. "And that is a good thing, for they were deeply in love."

The young man stays very still and silent, his right palm resting on Hannibal's chest, over his heart. The doctor takes it and kisses the scarred palm.

"What is troubling you, mon rêve?" he asks.

"You're not going to die before I'm ready for you to die, right?" Will whispers. He sounds very innocent and young, and terribly afraid. "I don't think I can survive that."

Hannibal smiles and kisses him again. This is a tenderness he is glad to possess and partake of daily, even if he has had to wait decades for Will. "Not even I can deny death his due, mon amour," he says. "But between now and then, I will love you to the best of my abilities."

Will snuggles closer, demanding Hannibal's embrace, and says nothing more.

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Clark Ingram is smiling the way a shark does when it's circling its prey.

Alana Bloom, who is interviewing him, is not put off. "How does that make you feel, Mr Ingram?"

"Right now I'm feeling inconvenienced." His expression never wavers. "I'm being detained on the word of one very damaged individual."

"You're not being detained, you're being interviewed. The FBI is just being thorough."

The decision to have Alana interview him is a deliberate choice on Beverly's part. Beverly, Jack and Hannibal are watching from the other side of the glass, and Hannibal is admiring the construct of a human before him. It is nowhere near as perfect as his own - for this, he has to thank Will, because he has Will as a reference point from which to extrapolate and build his own reactions - but it is quite a good effort. Not good enough, however, to hide from three experienced observers of human behavior.

Ingram leans forward, defensiveness around his eyes. "What are you writing down?"

"An observation," says Alana in her 'therapist' voice.

"About me?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Alana apologizes, seemingly sincere, "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

Ingram barely flinches and withdraws. The smile wavers for a fraction of a second; Hannibal catches the pure rage that is masked by the courteous expression. It is almost a shame to have the FBI take this one, if Hannibal only considers the psychology of the man, but Ingram has no artistry with his kills.

Beverly folds her arms and smiles with satisfaction. "That's my girl."

"She keeps pushing him on his feelings, not on the facts," says Jack quietly. "And he's responding in the classic way a psychopath would."

Hannibal nods. "She's trying to gauge how comfortable he is with emotion, if he has any. He couldn't bear being touched by her."

"His responses are typical of psychopaths during interviews," says Jack, "but could also be resentment."

"He's a predator, Jack, look at his eyes. Dead eyes." Beverly shakes her head. "I've seen corpses with more emotion on their faces."

The interview goes on, Alana deftly testing Ingram for more signs of psychopathy. Hannibal is proud of his former protege, and curious about what Ingram will do next, now that he is within the FBI's radar. He's likely to lash out at Bernadone, or, if he can withstand his impulses, quietly retreat to another part of the country.

"There is no evidence I did this," says the social worker. "And if you'd like to know how I feel, I feel like I don't want to be here anymore. So, if you're not detaining me, I'd like to be on my way now."

Still, calm and even. Retreat it is to be then. Hannibal admires the confidence Ingram wears, though it is unwarranted. Beverly has the look of a terrier with a target, and he is the rat she intends to chase down.

"Let him go," says Jack.

"We're making a mistake," Beverly argues.

"We have nothing to hold him on," Jack reminds Beverly, and buzzes for Alana to know the interview has concluded.

Hannibal steps back and murmurs to Beverly, "I don't think there will be evidence on the bodies either."

"There isn't much usable stuff." The agent looks frustrated. "Damn it, Hannibal. This *is* the guy!"

"Unfortunately, Jack's right. You have nothing to hold him on."

Uncharacteristically, Beverly swears under her breath. She looks gray beneath her eyes, and even her hair is less lustrous than usual; she has it pinned up in a casual French braid and it is coming loose.

Hannibal pats her shoulder. "You and Alana should come over. You need to relax, and Will would love your company."

"I'll have to check over the autopsy and trace reports before I can head down," says Beverly. "Alana's lectures are done for the day, though. Maybe she and Will can walk the dogs together."

"That sounds good," says Hannibal.

Jack and Alana return to the room. Alana hands over the interview notes to Beverly. "I don't like him."

"None of us do," says Jack. "But we can't lock him up."

"Can we put him on surveillance?" Alana asks.

"On the word of a psychologically-damaged individual? Difficult to justify." Jack slides his hands into his pockets. "We need reason to put anyone under watch."

"He may go after Peter Bernadone," Hannibal points out.

"I'll set two uniforms on his house. If he leaves after he returns home, we'll know."

Beverly cracks her knuckles. "Lanie, Hannibal's invited us for dinner. You up for it?"

"Sure," says Alana. She smiles at her former mentor. "I always enjoy dining at *chez* Lecter."

"Hannibal, why don't you come take a look at the women we found?" asks Beverly. "Maybe you can see something we didn't. Fresh eyes, and all that. Alana's already given me her ideas."

Hannibal nods his acquiescence. "Will should be home by the time you get there, Alana. Or would you rather wait for me?"

"Don't worry about me," she says. "I'll go home, type up some of my notes before I head over."

*****

"Hey Bev! Where's Alana?" Will opens the door and beams brightly. The dogs have had a good, long walk, and he's looking forward to dinner. Ushering Beverly in, he takes her jacket but leaves the door open.

"Alana?" Beverly pauses midway through handing her jacket to Will. "She's not here? But she left earlier. Before Hannibal did."

"Hannibal's already cooking. He said she was planning to stop over at home. I figured she was waiting for you and come over together."

"What? No, she was supposed to- Hannibal?" Beverly calls out.

The doctor came out of the kitchen, pulling on his jacket. "Beverly, good evening. Dinner's almost ready, so if you and Alana will get seated-"

"Did Alana call you? Did she text you about being late?"

Hannibal looks confused. "No, she- She's not with you?"

Beverly bites her lower lip. "No, she didn't answer her phone when I called. I thought she was out walking the dogs or, or helping you in the kitchen... Where *is* that woman?"

She pulls her cell phone from her pocket and starts calling. As each second passed, her jaw becomes more and more tense. Suddenly she ends the call and stares at Hannibal and Will. Her eyes are wild and fearful - she looks like a stranger has taken up residence in her body. Will feels a stab of secondhand terror from that one look, and involuntarily he grabs hold of Hannibal's arm.

"Will?" Hannibal murmurs.

The young man swallows. "She's in trouble."

Beverly covers her mouth, but the words escape her nonetheless. "What if *Clark Ingram* got her?"

*****

In all his time of knowing Beverly Katz, she has been a confident, collected and cheerful woman. Yet the mere thought that Alana is in mortal danger ratchets her into panic. Hannibal takes that moment between heartbeats to admire the color in her cheeks and the vulnerability of her expression; the rarity of such an event makes it worth his appreciation.

"Call Jack," Hannibal tells her. "He was liaising with the local police to watch Ingram."

The woman makes the call immediately, turning from the two men. She is agitated as she converses with her superior; apparently, the cops have been waiting outside Ingram's residence as instructed.

Thing is, Ingram has not returned home since his interview.

"This worries me," says Hannibal. "It's been five hours since we talked at Quantico."

"You have any ideas where she might be?" Beverly asks, her hand clenched around her phone and the other hovering near her holster.

The psychiatrist ponders. "He's a psychopath, exhibiting signs of narcissism. His control has been shaken - we will need to look at where he felt the most in control before."

Will tilts his chin. "Where he buried the other women."

"How sure are you?" Beverly asks, her face white with worry.

"That's where he held the power of life and death," Hannibal says, supporting Will's guess. "He didn't choose places of convenience to discard his victims. That place means something to him."

Beverly nods tersely. "I'm heading there with backup. You two stay here, just in case."

"Bev-"

"No, Will, don't argue- I have to. I have to be FBI right now." She leaves without a farewell, not that either Hannibal nor Will begrudges her for her curt departure.

Once she has got into her car and revved out of sight, Hannibal then murmurs, "He won't be there though. Unless I'm mistaken, he's most likely to vent his frustration on Peter Bernadone."

"So you sent Beverly off to save Alana but not to catch Ingram," says Will, equally quietly. His lips twitch into a minute, vicious snarl. "We haven't hunted this season."

Hannibal nods, and shrugs out of his jacket. It's too warm to wear so many layers under plastic.

"Take your phone but turn off GPS," says Will, grabbing his keys from the bowl in the hallway. "I'm driving."

"The suits are in my car."

"I'll get them, and you can lock up."

*****

The drive to Blackbriars Stables is almost an hour long. Despite that, neither Hannibal nor Will speak. Will is nearly vibrating out of his skin in anticipation of the hunt. He's always tightly wound until Hannibal finishes; the older man has his hand on Will's right knee, grounding him in the moment.

Hannibal himself is enveloped in ice-cold serenity. Alana will be rescued, he's certain of it, but he is aware of the anger inside. That is unusual - Hannibal values Alana as a person, genuinely considers her a friend, but he hasn't thought he will ever have emotional reactions to her. He pokes at the emotion, wondering if it is because he considers her part of his collection of People Not To Harm or because he truly possesses sentiment for a former protege.

Hannibal's phone trills abruptly as they are reaching the stables, so Will pulls over and kills the engine.

"Jack," says Hannibal, putting his phone on speaker, "have you found her? Is she safe?"

"The site is intact, but we found her car nearby. There's blood on the seat, but not a lot. We've got the canine units out now." Jack shouts something unintelligible at someone in the background, and returns to speaking with *Hannibal. "When we find her, I will need you and Will to go to the hospital and keep Beverly from doing anything rash. She's liable to hunt down Ingram and shoot him on sight."*

"Of course. Keep us posted, please."

Once the doctor hangs up, Will steps out of the car. "Close enough to walk. Should we put on the suits?"

"Not yet. Ingram may not have come here." Hannibal does, however, pass Will a taser, and they pull on gloves for their hands and covers for their shoes. Hannibal tucks the suits under his arm.

They walk to Bernadone's barn first. Hannibal frowns as they approach; there is a familiar scent in the air, but mingled with heavy animal musk.

"Something's wrong," he says under his breath, and quickens his pace.

It is absolutely, heartbreakingly silent. The cages have been ruined, the doors torn off. This close, both Will and Hannibal can smell blood. Will peers in, cautiously, aware that he is not to step inside, and then he freezes when he sees what has been done to the creatures in Peter Bernadone's care.

His voice is eerily devoid of emotion when he says, "Hannibal. I want this one."

Hannibal nods. "You'll have him."

*****

They peek into the stables and find Bernadone sitting alone in the stables, next to another dead horse. His hands are bloody, and the horse's stomach look distended. Bernadone just looks hollow and numbed. After a while, he gets to his feet, and stumbles out of the stables to head towards his barn and all the poor, mutilated, dead animals. He does not notice the two men hiding in the shadows.

Will exhales with relief, and then mouths at Hannibal's ear, "He's got his social worker in the horse."

"An appropriate end for the man," says Hannibal in an equally soft voice.

Once Bernadone is safely out of the way, Will and Hannibal enter the stables to examine Bernadone's work. Neat stitching all the way along the horse's abdomen; the man truly understands animals. Without meaning to, Will imagines looking at Bernadone weeping over the dead creature, and feeling a surge of hot, pleased vindictiveness flood him.

"Will, come back to me." Hannibal's firm hold on the back of his neck keeps the young man from grabbing a bloody hammer that lay on the ground, near the hind legs of the dead horse. "You are empathizing again."

"Hard not to," Will points out. "The scene is so fresh."

Hannibal kisses his temple and guides him towards the door. As they are about to exit, a movement and a wet, tearing sound catches their attention. As one, they turn to stare at the stretching and pushing from within the horse abdomen, and then the stitches rip and an arm gropes out. Then a shoulder, and a head - Clark Ingram falls out of the cavity in which he has been sealed, bloody and disgusting.

Will quickly darts into the shadows of one of the pens. Hannibal stands where he is and waits.

Blinded by the gore over his face, Ingram grabs hold of the hammer and staggers to his feet. When he swivels around, he gapes to see Hannibal. "You-"

"You should have stayed in the horse," Hannibal quips, and smiles darkly.

Will tasers Ingram from behind and the man collapses. The young man shakes his head. "If you are a psychopath, try to be a smart one."

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Alana blinks her eyes open slowly, and winces at the light shining into her eyes from overhead. Her Beverly is right there holding her hand. Poor woman is asleep, her cheek smushed against Alana's hip; the shadows beneath her eyes are unhealthily blue. There's a

plastic thing resting on her face that is deeply uncomfortable. Thought comes to her slowly - that plasticky thing is an oxygen mask, and Beverly is here, and she herself is alive.

She's alive. She isn't buried underground, she isn't fighting to stay calm, she isn't trying to tear a hole through the box he had her in-

Two figures rise from their places by the window. Alana has to squint to focus: it's Hannibal and Will.

"You're awake," Hannibal whispers with a glad smile.

Will just touches her hand, his blue-gray eyes shimmering with emotion.

She tries to speak, but ends up coughing - God she can still smell the box, it has to be her imagination - and wakes Beverly up.

The agent jolts upright, and gawps when she sees Alana blinking at her. Her speechlessness lasts a few seconds, and then she all but pounces, embracing her fiancee so tightly that Alana thinks she may be suffocating all over again.

Hannibal sees her plight, and gently disengages Beverly from Alana. "She needs to breathe."

"Oh God, oh God I'm sorry, sweetie, Lanie, God," Beverly babbles, and swipes tears from her cheeks. Tears on Beverly feels wrong, somehow.

Alana reaches up and brushes over her fiancee's face, and only now sees how torn up her hands are - her fingers are swathed in bandages. Oh right - she tried to claw her way out.

"Lanie, I'm sorry I took so long, I'm so sorry about this." Beverly kisses her brow, strokes her hair, caresses her cheeks.

"Bev... 's okay. It's okay. Not your fault," Alana whispers, and then gags and coughs on her dry throat.

They hurriedly offer her some ice chips, removing the mask for a moment, and then a doctor comes in with a phalanx of nurses and students. They check on her vitals, and then starts talking about her recovery. Alana only listens with half an ear; her focus is on Beverly. The agent is gripping Alana's hand like she's afraid the psychiatrist will fade away.

Once the doctor is done with his spiel, Hannibal and Will come back to the side of the bed.

"How are you feeling?" Will asks.

"Like I've just crawled out of my own grave," says Alana. She sniffs and blinks, and makes herself smile. It's a wobbly smile. "I'll be all right."

"Will, why don't we give them some space?" Hannibal gently steers his boyfriend towards the door, and nods at Alana. He understands, of course, and the moment the door clicks, Alana reaches for Beverly.

The two women hold each other close, too aware that they came within inches of losing Alana. The thought crashes into Alana's chest and tears broke free from her control. She tries to be calm, so that the nurses won't come in and interrupt this fragile moment; she needs to be sure that this is real, and having Beverly here is helping her become centered and grounded.

Beverly just holds her tightly and rocks her. "I've got you, babe. I have you. I love you."

"I know," hiccups Alana, and breathes in what remains of Beverly's Clinique *Happy*. "God, Bev, I kept thinking I'd never see you again, and you'll find me dead, and I was so scared-"

They kiss, soft, chapped lips brushing together, and that makes Alana feel a little less scared, so they keep doing it until the tears and rambling stop. Beverly keeps running her hand through Alana's hair, slightly greasy and lank with the hours. Finally, she rests her brow on Alana's forehead. "I've got you."

"Yeah. Good."

*****

Jack strides up the hallway. "She's awake?"

"Yes. I don't think she's ready to be questioned yet, especially since Beverly Katz might just bite your head off should you try," Hannibal warns.

"Noted. We have yet to find Ingram though. I have Price and Zeller going back to Blackbriar Stables; there's another dead horse, its stomach open and looking like someone crawled out of it, and Peter Bernadone claims that he stuffed Clark Ingram in there alive last night. He doesn't know what happened to Ingram afterwards, because he was burying all the other animals that Ingram slaughtered." The head of the Behavioral Science Unit lets his shoulders sag. "I'm afraid that if we don't get Ingram soon, Beverly will go out and shoot him."

Hannibal shakes his head. "Alana has just woken up. Beverly will probably wish to spend as much time as possible with Alana for the time being."

"I'll station two agents here, just in case. Thanks for keeping Beverly company, Hannibal, Will. I can't impose on you two much further," says Jack.

Will nods and stifles a yawn. It is nearly three in the morning, after all. "We'll be back here later."

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"Oh, you're awake," says a dark-haired young man with a pleasant smile that emphatically does not reach his eyes. It is too dim to make out the young man's features.

Clark Ingram grimaces and tries to shake off the aftereffects of the taser. There is classical music in the background but he doesn't recognize it. "Who are you?"

The young man sits down and examines Ingram. "I'm Peter's friend."

"I'm the victim here," says Clark in a wheedling tone. "He put me... he put me in a *horse*."

"I know. I saw you climbing out." The young man's gaze flicks over Ingram, still caked in drying blood and stinking of horse innards. There is a coldness there that is familiar; Clark has seen it in the mirror when he deigns to look at himself.

"Why am I here then? You should be reporting him to the police!"

"You buried my friend in a grave," says the young man evenly. "You killed seventeen other women in the same way. You tried to frame Peter. You mutilated and killed the animals he was taking care of." He leans forward and bares his teeth. "You don't deserve to suffocate in a horse's belly. You deserve *worse*."

Ingram starts struggling against his bonds, but his efforts are futile. "Let me go! Who are you?"

The young man looks at someone behind Ingram. "When you wake up, Mr Ingram, you will, for the first time in your life, empathize with the poor women and animals you killed. How helpless they must have felt."

There is a sensation of a needle pressing into his skin, and then blackness rushes up to drag him into unconsciousness. His final thought is, *I don't want to wake up.*

*****

"I've injected the anesthetic." Hannibal hands the hunting knife to Will. "Here, and here."

"He's not going to bleed out and die, is he?"

"No," Hannibal assures. "I will cauterize the wounds as necessary."

Miserere Deus plays on, an enchantingly glorious piece of choral music. Both of them pause and savor the moment.

Then Will smiles, and kisses Hannibal deeply in gratitude and awe. "You are the best boyfriend ever."

"And you," the psychiatrist says with a smirk, "can be an absolute horror."

Chapter End Notes

Allegri - Miserere

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Thanks for everything you've done, Hannibal," says Alana sincerely. It's been three days and she has already returned to her house, while Beverly has reluctantly gone back to work. There is an agent in the house, too; Alana has to work around her presence, but Agent Stone has been unobtrusive and polite when Hannibal offers her lunch. She has taken the stew and gone back to wherever she goes when watching the house.

Hannibal places a serving of stew on the table. "You are my friend, Alana. It's only right that I lend a hand when needed."

"I just... I'm still having nightmares," Alana confides. "I didn't have them before."

"You'll have to find a way to move past the horror of what was done to you," says Hannibal kindly. He takes the seat facing her and serves himself. "Will had nightmares after Garrett Jacob Hobbs attacked him. The mind tries to exorcise its demons through your subconscious."

Alana makes a wry expression. "I'm also a psychiatrist, Hannibal. I know what my mind is trying to do."

"That does not mean you want to let it," Hannibal ripostes in a gentle manner. The stew is delicious - Hannibal gives credit to Will for providing the meat. "I heard that Beverly is leading the hunt for Clark Ingram."

Other than having been buried underground, Alana also suffered a mild concussion and severe lacerations on her wrists and ankles. She had managed to free her hands and then clawed at the box, shredding her nails and scratching her fingertips raw. It is perfectly understandable why Beverly Katz wants to, in her own words, "flay Ingram and throw him into a woodchipper". Unfortunately, Beverly's design for Ingram will not be fulfilled.

"I hope they find him soon," Alana says. "I still feel as though he's waiting to get me... He came out of nowhere, Hannibal. Just grabbed me and knocked me out - straight cut to black."

Hannibal pauses. "You have protection detail until he's found, yes?"

"They're not Beverly." She sighs. She rubs the ruby flowers of her engagement ring, unaware that she is doing that. "And I can't ask her to not do her job. She's as stressed as I am by his disappearance. They won't be here much longer, I think. They must have combed Baltimore by now."

He pats the back of Alana's hand in understanding. "You will feel better once you are well enough to return to work. He will be found, Alana. He can't escape Beverly's wrath forever, and you are guarded now."

The woman flushes. "Thanks, Hannibal. That's reassuring."

"Let's think of more pleasant things," Hannibal suggests. "Have you come to a decision on where you wish to have the ceremony?"

*****

After lunch, Hannibal returns to his office, feeling inexplicably pleased with how events have transpired. Bernadone was arrested for the desecration of Sarah Kramer's corpse - though, in Hannibal's opinion, Bernadone had in fact *elevated* her, brought poetry to her death - and sent to a psychiatric care facility. Will and Hannibal have taken care of Clark Ingram, with no one the wiser. It's a satisfaction of a job done well, and the fact that it had been Will's design merely added to Hannibal's pleasure.

Hannibal's last appointment of the day is one that he will remember with fondness. Margot has come with news that she intends to move away to New York, once Mason is no longer a problem. Apparently she has found a new lover, someone she is serious about, and they have made plans.

Hannibal gives her some careful advice. Both of them understand that this is likely to be Margot's final appointment, though neither verbalize the thought. She embraces him for the very first time in their acquaintance, and he holds her tenderly, as he would have his sister. This is a seed planted years ago and grown tall and strong, slender and resilient. He has no doubt she will flourish wherever she goes, regardless of her father's narrow-minded will. Still, if she succeeds, she and her girlfriend will have a very comfortable life in the future.

When he enters the house, he's surprised by the silence. Then he hears the piano, just one note being played repeatedly. The young man must be tuning his piano.

Will peers out from his beloved Blüthner and accepts a kiss from his lover. "Hey there."

"Hey yourself," says Hannibal. "Something wrong with the piano?"

"F4-sharp," says Will, slightly distracted. He tightens the pin. "Play it for me?"

Hannibal obliges. Closing his eyes, Will cocks his head, first to the left and then the right, and asks Hannibal to do it again. It takes about five times before Will has it adjusted to his satisfaction. He then checks his work with the electronic tuner. The doctor isn't even surprised that there are no further adjustments to be made. He has observed how acute Will's hearing can be.

"How is Alana?" the young man asks, putting away his tools and dusting his hands off on his jeans.

"She's better. She says she now has nightmares; I would assume she will have more. Beverly is still searching for Ingram."

"She won't find him," says Will. He smiles wickedly and his blue eyes flick over at Hannibal's proud expression. It draws Hannibal close, and the doctor rests his hands on Will's

slim hips. "Do you think they should find him?"

"I leave it to your discretion, mon amour," Hannibal murmurs, breathing in Will's scent. "He is your composition, after all."

"I'm sure he's already decomposing," says Will smartly. "I'd rather leave him in there. It's good to have the FBI frustrated. They call you at the most inconsiderate times."

Hannibal smiles. Now and then, when things aren't too tense, Jack sometimes jokes about *graphic detail.* "As in the times you'd rather I stay in bed with you?"

"As in the times I'd rather you stay in bed making love to me." The younger man pecks a kiss on Hannibal's left cheek. "I'm going to walk the dogs. Do you want to join me?"

"Sure. You can get them ready, and I'll put these away first."

Will kisses him again. "I made reservations at Red Juniper. I've a craving for their lemon ginger cheesecake."

"Cravings?" Hannibal's brow creases and he peers seriously at his boyfriend. "Will, are you pregnant?"

The impertinent question has Will staring in incomprehension at Hannibal. Dr Hannibal Lecter, respected psychiatrist and former surgeon, asking if Will is pregnant.

"If I am, it's all your fault," Will retorts with a burst of laughter. He looks delectable with pinked cheeks and soft eyes. "Meet you at the door."

*****

They take a long, leisurely stroll to the restaurant where they can sit on a patio with Buster and Winston. The dogs are given water bowls which they lap up eagerly.

"Did you like my execution?" Will asks, finishing the last bits of his green salad. Hannibal likes it, except the bite of the citrus vinaigrette was a little weak.

The doctor smiles. Red Juniper has a decent selection of pinot noir, which will pair wonderfully with the dish he ordered. The pear salad isn't too bad either, even if the pears are nearly too ripe for this particular recipe. "I am a biased judge, Will."

"Well, try to be objective."

"I find it entirely within your character," says Hannibal. "You are, at the core, an intensely moral creature."

Their main dishes arrive. Hannibal has ordered a wild goose breast with orange glaze; Will has miso-glazed scallops with soba noodles. Winston flops down by Will's feet and shuts his eyes. Buster, on the other hand, remains perky and optimistic by Hannibal's side.

Will rolls his eyes when Hannibal sneaks a bite of goose down to the dog. "You spoil him rotten."

"You're the one who chose him," the doctor reminds him, his eyes crinkling with good humor, but stops feeding Buster.

There is a slight chilliness to the air, but Will feels warm and loved. It should alarm him that he has no qualms at all about torturing and murdering a man - he did just bury Ingram in the wee hours that morning with eight rats he picked up from various traps around Blackbriar Stables - but he is utterly at peace with himself.

"Doesn't that make you a monster?"

At the voice, Will jolts and looks up. Abigail Hobbs peers over Hannibal's shoulder and frowns. She tilts her head quizzically. "A cannibal eating non-human meat. There should be a joke in here somehow. I wonder if it tastes different to him."

"Will? Is there something wrong?"

The young man blinks a few times. "I just - I just saw Abigail Hobbs."

"Abigail Hobbs?" Hannibal looks behind him; there are only two other tables occupied, and they are definitely not Abigail Hobbs. "Will, she's in prison."

"No, I saw-" Will covers his mouth. "She was standing. Behind you. She-she was making a comment on your food. She was- She said I was a monster."

Hannibal reaches across the small table for Will's hand and grasps it firmly. "Will. Ground yourself."

"She was *there*-"

"Ground yourself," Hannibal repeats, squeezing his lover's hand.

Will takes a deep breath and mutters, "It's seven-forty-two, my name is Will Graham, I'm in Red Juniper, I'm with Hannibal Lecter and our two dogs." He lets out the rest of this breath in a soft sigh and slowly looks up again.

Hannibal pets Will's hand. "Better?"

Will smiles weakly. "She's still there."

*****

It's a tense walk back home, and the dogs have picked up on the nervous energy thrumming inside Will. They snap in irritation at each other, something that they don't usually do, and after half a block Hannibal takes the leads from Will. His calm assurance gets the canines to stop snarling at each other, but Will is hugging his middle and refusing to look at his lover.

It's *sickening.* Will can feel Abigail keeping pace right beside him. She's not saying a word. Yet the weight of all that she does not say feels like chains draped over Will's shoulders.

They are back at home before Will realizes it, and he waits at the patio until Hannibal has removed the leashes from the dogs. As the older man comes to him, Will says, "I'm not feeling guilty."

"Over Ingram?"

"Yeah. I don't feel guilty over designing his death," he hisses out, partly to Hannibal, partly to himself, but mostly to the hallucination of Abigail Hobbs, who has made herself comfortable perching on the patio furniture. "Hannibal, I don't regret doing any of it."

"I believe you."

"*Then why am I seeing her?*" he all but shouts, his voice strangled and anguished. He tears his gaze from the girl and looks at his boyfriend. Tears gather defiantly in the corners of his eyes and he chokes them back. He is not going to cry over the death of the human excrement that is Clark Ingram. "I don't *want* her here, Hannibal!"

*****

The psychiatrist pulls Will into a hug, tucking the dark curly head into the crook of his neck. He can feel the young man shuddering, and for a second he drinks in Will's anguish.

"Calm down, Will, just lean on me." He rocks Will for a few seconds until he feels his lover's breathing even out. "Now, tell me what you see when you imagine Ingram's death."

"What?"

"I want you to visualize Clark Ingram's death. Sink into that visualization to chase Abigail away." Hannibal cradles Will's cheek with his left hand and smiles at him. "She refused to acknowledge her part in her father's kills. Perhaps your subconscious is trying to deny this one."

"I'm not denying it-"

"You deny the essence of it, because you have not seen him die." Hannibal kisses Will on the brow. "Come, mon amour. We will go in, and you will tell me about your design."

*****

The doctor leads Will into their bedroom and they lie together on the bed, Hannibal leaning against the headboard and Will's head resting on his thighs. Hannibal runs his fingers through Will's hair, watching how the tendrils spring up into curls.

"It's dark," Will begins in a whisper. "I open my eyes, and I think that I haven't opened them yet. It is stuffy, and my head feels heavy, like I've been drugged. Then I hear the noise - tiny scratching claws on cheap plywood - and I feel something run over my belly and chest.

Instinctively, I try to swat it." He swallows and closes his eyes. "That is when I realize I have no hands. I don't even have forearms. They've taken my arms from me."

Hannibal lets his fingers drift over Will's closed eyelids.

Will speaks as though hypnotized. "In a panic, I try to sit up, and that's when I discover... they have taken my legs too. I am helpless, in the dark, in a box... and there are sounds of rats. And I realize how I am going to die. And I scream and *scream,* for that is the only tool left to me. This is how they felt, the women I killed, and it is terrifying." He shudders and opens his eyes again, the pupils blown. "*God.*"

Hannibal cups his chin. "How do you feel?"

"I feel... defiled, inside my head," says Will. He licks his lips. "It's hideous. It's *intoxicating.*"

"Does he deserve this death?"

"Yes." Will sits up and faces Hannibal. "A thousand times, yes. He would never have learned otherwise."

"And then he paid with his life for the understanding." Hannibal kisses Will on his brow.

Will shuts his eyes again and hugs himself. "I don't regret it, even if I can feel how it is. He deserved every second of it."

"You have judged him, found him wanting, and sentenced him according to his crimes." Hannibal pulls him in to tuck him under his jaw. "You have done exactly as your nature dictates, mon amour, and I am proud of you."

They lie wrapped together, and the young man leans against Hannibal's shoulder. The moment rests heavy and dense on them both.

"She's not there anymore," Will finally whispers. He curls into Hannibal's embrace. "What if she appears again? I shouldn't be seeing her, Hannibal. I *shouldn't.*"

"Would you like to visit her?"

"Hell no. I have no wish to-" Will takes a deep, slow breath, and expels it. "I just want to live my life and forget she even exists."

*****

Once Will is asleep, Hannibal goes to the kitchen to marinate the cuts of meat he has reserved for steaks. The stew he served Alana used up half an arm, and they have already had thigh baked in clay last night.

Hannibal shakes up the dry rub and spreads it over the meat. He supposes the internal conflict over whether to attend college has Will's psyche tearing itself apart. It is worrying that Will is projecting Abigail Hobbs, however. That his lover's brilliant mind has latched on to someone who is no longer of relevance to them... it is distasteful.

The doctor seals the steaks and puts them into the refrigerator. It is perhaps fitting, then, that he can identify with Garrett Jacob Hobbs. While he has no paternal feelings for Will, the nagging sense of impending separation is a bitter, foul taste that lingers in the back of his mind. Hannibal knows himself very well, and recognizes it as apprehension. Will could find someone more suited to him than Hannibal; Will could abandon Hannibal forever. However, as Hannibal once told Bedelia, he will not give up this relationship without a fight, and he intends to strike first.

Where Hobbs blamed everyone else and tried to tie Abigail to himself with secrets, Hannibal will display his love publicly and demonstrate to Will why they belong together. There will be no doubt in anyone's mind of Hannibal's intentions.

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In an effort to cheer up Alana and Beverly, Will and Hannibal organize a walking trail one Saturday, along with Matthew and Esther. The six find themselves at Chinquapin Run Park, with Will and Esther taking the lead with the dogs, the two women in the middle, and Hannibal and Matthew following them, carrying a basket of food and a cooler.

It's a lovely afternoon, with summer's vibrancy fading into fall's mellow fruitfulness; the varied sounds of insects and birds add a stirring symphony to the scenic view. Hannibal is counting down the days to his and Will's anniversary; the venue has been booked, thanks to Alana, and he has planned everything, down to the menu for that day.

Matthew is pensive next to the older man; there is an added heaviness to his stride. Sometimes Hannibal forgets that Matthew is only a year Will's senior. The two young men spent so much time together, yet often Hannibal will cast Matthew as being much older than Will. Perhaps the fact that Matthew is an older brother gives him added maturity.

"Esther seems much happier now that the source of her nightmares is gone," Hannibal says quietly after they have passed the two women and have a measure of privacy. Beverly is taking photos of the view with Alana as her model, and it is heartening to see the smiles on their faces.

"She is," Matthew replies. "The only hitch now is that she's beginning to misbehave more and more often. Our routine is slightly hampered by my job - it's a fairly long commute, even with a car. I've already negotiated to take only day shifts, but there are times they need extra hands on deck."

"Couldn't your mother step in?" asks the doctor. "She is, after all, the primary caregiver."

Matthew sighs. "She works the night shift. Besides, she already handles Esther in the mornings."

"Your work at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane is demanding, both in terms of your time and your energy."

"I like being there though." The young man shifts the cooler in his hands. "Nice to know that there are people whose minds are more damaged than mine."

Hannibal regards Matthew with a tiny smile. "You consider yourself damaged."

They walk on in cautious silence as Matthew returns the regard. Finally, he seems to come to a conclusion. "I thought of murdering my parents at the tender age of seven, sir. I highly doubt that is the workings of a normal mind."

"That was as a child. You have grown."

"Oh, I have, sir." Matthew smirks and lowers his gaze to the ground. "The vague thoughts are now plans in my mind. Complete, detailed plans. Merely not... executed."

"You are very honest with me." Hannibal glances over his shoulder; Beverly is now the one being photographed with silly poses. There is little likelihood they will be overheard. "Why are you so frank with me?"

The nurse shrugs. "I think we are like... hawks. Smaller birds, they mob hawks and chase them away." He smiles. "Not possible for hawks to survive that way."

"You imagine a world where hawks band together."

"I imagine what they could do."

Hannibal shakes his head and chuckles. "This particular hawk has been tethered, Matthew, tamed to the only hand who knows how to handle it."

The two of them look at the dark-haired young man walking ahead, one hand holding Buster's leash and the other Esther's hand, for all the world appearing to be a carefree young adult out for a day's walk with a younger sister.

"He understands us," Matthew agrees. "And you understand him."

"As do you."

"Differently from you."

"We play different roles in his life," says Hannibal. "And he needs us both."

Matthew ponders over the remark. The older man thinks that it is a good thing Will has delineated clear roles for them both: a best friend in Matthew, a lover in Hannibal. They are too similar to coexist otherwise. He wonders what might have happened if they have had to vie for Will's affections.

Two killers executing bloody and violent courtships, perhaps, that can only end in one or both of their deaths.

Hannibal allows his imagination to spin out frescoes painted in crimson and flaking brown, of delicacies cooked using the human heart, of tableaux made from the clay of human flesh.

It would have been breathtaking, each of them trying to outperform the other for the only person in the world who could have appreciated it.

No, it is a good thing that Will Graham belonged to Hannibal before he met Matthew. The other life, while intoxicating and thrilling, would not have been sustainable.

"Sir, I have a question," Matthew says quietly, breaking into Hannibal's thoughts.

"Please, go ahead."

"Why do you care about us?" Matthew gestures at Esther far ahead of them. "Will has other friends now. Why us?"

The psychiatrist mulls over the question. It's a fair one to ask. "I care about Esther because she reminds me of my family. I care about you simply because I am curious about you, and thus far you have exceeded my expectations. I'm glad Will found a friend in you."

Matthew laughs, low and surprised. "I'm not sure if I should be flattered by that."

"When you have decided, do let me know."

*****

"Thanks for the idea, doc, it's cheered her up," says Beverly afterwards when they have settled down for a picnic. Alana and Esther are tossing tennis balls for the dogs, while Will and Matthew have taken a stroll down to the riverside. "And cheered *me* up, for that matter."

"Then we have succeeded." Hannibal passes her another can of beer.

She exhales and leans back. The sun is warm but not scorching, and she looks content. "It's just... I keep thinking about him coming back, and it makes my blood run cold. If I hadn't found her... if your guess had been wrong..."

Hannibal sips his wine. "I understand. She is dear to me."

"She really liked you back when," says Beverly, a slight tease in her voice. "Sometimes I wonder how it may have turned out, her with you. And then I'd feel jealous of a hypothetical situation and, uh, well. Let's say it's a good thing she proposed."

"Have you set a date?"

"Next summer. Maybe an August wedding." She grins. "My baby sister's looking forward to all the dress shopping. She insists on helping both of us picking out gowns. I'm dreading the day I have to tell her I already have a dress selected. The burgers are fantastic, by the way. I didn't know they are in your repertoire."

"Will made them. I only cooked the meat." Hannibal watches Alana and Esther, satisfied in that moment. There is nothing left of Ingram now, other than what the rats left behind underground.

"I heard you're intending a proposal," says the woman, braiding her hair with astonishing speed. Her emerald earrings - worn in lieu of her actual engagement ring, in deference to the necessities of Beverly's job - glitter brightly in the sun.

"Alana wasn't supposed to tell."

"Please. I'm an FBI agent in the Behavioral Analysis Unit, I know when someone's hiding something," she says. "And she's terrible at hiding secrets of her own. Though, technically, that would be your secret."

The doctor smiles. "I trust that you'll be discreet."

"Sure." Beverly looks over and smirks. Her eyes are keenly evaluative. "So how much of the wedding have you planned out?"

"I haven't really thought that far ahead." Hannibal effects a prim manner, even though he's clearly fighting a losing battle. He does enjoy her brash, forthright manner; it's not rude, not the way some pigs are. He does appreciate intelligence, and *that* she has in abundance.

"Liar. Bet you've at least considered the season and the color scheme."

"...a spring wedding, and primarily blue. For his eyes."

The agent punches the air in victory. "Ha! I *knew* it!"

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"...and of course, I'll get on my knee and everything."

Matthew grins suggestively. "And while you're down there-"

"Shut up." Will elbows his friend in the ribs and then sticks his hands into his pockets. "It's weird though. I mean, there is no earthly way he's going to say no, but I'm still terrified right down to my boots."

The nurse picks up a pebble and tosses it into the river. "I'd be surprised if you weren't."

The rushing water plays over their comfortable silence, broken now and then by a bird's swoop through the trees or the laughter of Alana and Esther. Will lets the serenity sink into his bones. It's wonderful, this peace within; Abigail Hobbs hasn't appeared to him for days. He's also made a decision on the whole college issue, though he won't tell Hannibal yet until after he's gone to the campus and check it out. Much improved he might be around people, Will isn't at ease in crowds. He wants to know how it would feel to be a college student. Or how it would feel to be a college student older than the other kids *and married.* Will wants to be married by the time he enters college, happily married to a most unique man. There will be talk again about him and his much older *husband*, and while it may not be something that Will wants to hear, he would gladly love to throw it in their faces that he has *the* Dr Hannibal Lecter as his husband. He's read Hannibal's treatise on social exclusion, and knows that it is widely-praised, and that many courses have it as required reading.

God, he could even register as William Graham-Lecter.

A strange little thrill dances along his nerves. *Graham-Lecter.* That has such a possessively lovely ring to it.

After a few minutes, Matthew interrupts his hazy musings. "Dr Lecter is a psychopath, isn't he?"

"What makes you say that?"

"A hunch," says Matthew distractedly. He skips another pebble into the water. "I'm sure he killed Ella, back when we had just met."

Will says nothing. He needs to know where Matthew intends to lead with this. Anything he says may be taken as an admission, and if he has to kill Matthew to ensure Hannibal's safety...

"I'm glad he did, she was such a bitch. I was hoping to do it myself, you know," says the other young man with a chuckle. "I'd have hung her upside down and slit her throat, drained her blood into the earth. Then cut out her heart and tongue. She was a fucking heartless bitch. My mother actually loved her. Makes me wonder how much I inherited from my mother, and how much of that I can excise."

"Why are you telling me this, Matthew?"

"To assure you that I understand him, and you, and I won't ever betray either of you, I swear by Esther." Matthew drapes an arm over Will's shoulders. "You don't ever need to worry about me or my motives, Will. You're my best friend. I'd do anything for my best friend."

Will feels the tension drain from his shoulders out of his fingers. "That's good to know, Mattie."

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The next Saturday, Hannibal got them tickets to attend *Don Giovanni*. Will fusses over his waistcoat - another opening night, the doctor does love his social peacocking - and walks out into their bedroom to find Hannibal frowning at his phone.

"What's wrong?" asks Will as he sweeps his curls from his brow.

"A serial murderer, apparently." Hannibal exhales, scrolling through the message. "Thankfully, I need not visit crime scenes for this profile. The murderer has kindly sent his gifts to the BCPD. FBI has taken over though."

"Cocky," says Will. He adjusts Hannibal's bow tie. "He'll get caught for sure."

"Apparently interesting though." Hannibal tosses his phone onto the bed and pulls on his jacket. "And they've been clever enough to not leave any prints. Could be a challenge."

"Are you going now or after the opera?"

"After," Hannibal decides. "They will be processing the bodies for evidence now, and I will only be in the way. And this way, you don't have to mingle."

A corner of Will's mouth lifts and he flicks a coy glance at Hannibal. He smooths his hands down the shawl lapel of Hannibal's classic black tux. "Don't say it like you're doing me a favor, when you really are just happy for the excuse to get me out of the grasping hands of Alexander Mendes."

"That man takes far too much pleasure in your company," Hannibal growls. Mendes is a novelist who writes tawdry serialized crime fiction; Hannibal thinks the books work better as kindling. Will, on the other hand, enjoys the man's works, which is possibly the only reason why he is still alive - the series hasn't been completed yet.

As though reading Hannibal's mind, Will adds, "And he has nearly 12,000 followers on Twitter, so don't even think about it."

"I bow to your wisdom." The older man tilts Will's chin up for a kiss, which Will gives gladly. Hannibal smiles against Will's lips. "We have new artwork to discover. How's that for a treat?"

"Listening to details of a serial murderer's craft?" Will grins and nibbles on his lover's lower lip. "Oh, Hannibal, you really know how to turn me on."

"You're incorrigible." Hannibal laughs, helping Will with his tuxedo jacket.

Will smirks and strides out the bedroom. "Please. You adore me like this."

Chapter End Notes

Here are the jewels!

rings and earrings

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jimmy Price pretends to be taken aback when he sees Hannibal and Will coming through the doors into the BAU. "I didn't know tonight's a black tie event."

Jack smiles for a second. "They were at the opera. We need an agent to keep Will from the case, he's not allowed near it. Miriam, if you could stay with him in my office?"

"Yes sir," says Miriam Lass. "How long might this take?"

"As long as necessary," Jack says, a faint hint of rebuke in his voice. "He's a good conversationalist once he's warmed up to you. Give the young man a chance."

Beverly may be the only one who catches the small sigh from the blonde agent. It is a little funny, since Lass practically idol worships Jack, even calling him *The Guru* (which Beverly has yet to let Jack live down, on the rare days they are not tensed up and stressing over dead bodies but drained over paperwork).

Mostly, Beverly finds the newest agent's attitude annoying. When Beverly signed on to the FBI, she found three truths in her job: to trust herself, to trust her colleagues, and to trust the system. The lack of any of the three will destabilize the work the FBI does.

Lass does not trust her colleagues. It's painfully obvious. She is an intelligent and driven agent; she also has too elevated an opinion of herself. Beverly can't remember the last time Lass asked for advice or suggestions. To Beverly, this is a warning sign. Someone who doesn't seek her colleagues' input is likely to overstep her boundaries and cause a lot of problems for the agency in the future.

Jack doesn't really agree with Beverly's feedback about Lass, but Lass has always done exactly as Jack asks, so it's not like Jack has seen the other side of the new agent. It's quite grating. It's even more irksome when Beverly overhears Lass dismissing Hannibal's profiles - the doctor is under no obligation to help the FBI, after all. Beverly has spoken to Lass about it but Lass has yet to change her attitude.

Hannibal may not be FBI, but he is part of the team, and has been a valuable resource the past few years. Hannibal's help makes the FBI's jobs easier. She doesn't always understand how the psychiatrist knows what he knows, but his profiles are rooted in evidence and interpretation, and he makes a keen amateur detective too, picking out relevant details with an unerring eye amid the chaos of crime scenes. Furthermore, the man has an iron stomach. This way, they don't have to bring in the other consulting psychiatrists as often for the gruesome cases, and anything that allows Alana to sleep better is a huge plus in Beverly's book.

She shakes herself out of her ruminations when Hannibal and Will enters Jack's office.

"Hey Bev," says Will with a smile. He looks lovely in his tuxedo. She admires the way the cut accentuates the lean limbs and slim hips. Also, the fact that he's undone his bow tie and left it hanging at the collar adds a layer of *déshabillé* to his overall beauty.

Hey. Lesbian, not blind.

Looking very dapper himself, Hannibal nods at the team. "Shall we?"

"Will, please stay with Agent Miriam Lass. We'll call when we're done," says Jack.

Will smiles briefly at Hannibal. "Don't rush on my account."

The head of the BAU and Hannibal stride out immediately, Jack filling the psychiatrist in on the case.

Will takes a seat. "There is coffee in this building, right?"

Lass rolls her eyes discreetly as she signals an intern to get her two coffees.

Jimmy and Beverly both notice the eye roll. Jimmy grins at Beverly, and mutters, "She's lucky Doctor Lecter didn't see that." He's not too fond of Lass either, even if he gets along better with her than Zeller, who, thankfully, is in Las Vegas on some sort of forensic science conference.

It's a shame, Beverly thinks, that she has yet to fit in with the team. The woman is very smart, after all, and ambitious, and a good agent, but she has the potential to become great, if she would only see that people aren't just measured by their cleverness.

*****

Within five minutes, Will comes to the conclusion that he does not like Agent Miriam Lass, and not because of her intelligence. She is very smart, and she knows she is smart. That's great. Will likes smart people.

He does not like the slightly condescending air she has once she finds out that he's not in college - he resists the urge to quote Marcus Aurelius and Lao Tzu at her - but this misconception keeps her from analyzing him, but he gets to analyze her. She doesn't talk to him much after getting him some love-in-a-canoe coffee. That tells him a little about her perception of those she deems less intelligent than herself, but he needs more data.

Naturally blonde hair, silver hoop earrings, simple makeup. Intelligent and assured about her personal competencies. Perhaps overly assured. In which case, why is she in this unit?

Probably looks up to Jack Crawford to work for him, in which case, she's not that good at reading people, is she?

He lets himself slip into the persona of Gray, letting sensuality color his posture, play up his callowness. He keeps his eyes averted and plays with his cuff links idly, tapping the mother-of-pearl accessories in a vague rhythm. The agent is formulating her impression of him and, for some reason, his gut is telling him to *make* her underestimate him.

Taking a sip of his coffee, Will grimaces. "This sludge is disgusting. You guys don't have a Starbucks in Quantico?"

"No we don't," says the agent. Her utter lack of interest is evident in her tone.

"Man, how do you guys survive on this swill?" he asks rhetorically, just for the expression on her face. "Hannibal never told me that the coffee here was this bad. Then again, he brings his own. Way better than this ditch water stuff."

It's obvious what she is thinking: *Dr Lecter has **this** for a boyfriend? He mustn't be all that sophisticated then.* For an FBI agent, Miriam Lass's face is too easy to read. Or perhaps years of schooling in decoding Hannibal's micro-expressions has honed Will's innate sensitivity and empathy.

"So," says Will, determined to goad her into revealing more, "I know what Beverly does here, and Mr Crawford's her boss and yours, and Hanni's a consultant. What do you do?" He mentally grimaces at the awful shortening of Hannibal's name - it's so *juvenile*. He makes a mental note to tell his boyfriend later, just to find out what sort of reaction Hannibal would have.

Come to think of it, he doesn't use any endearments or nicknames for Hannibal, while the older man plies him with half a dozen in various languages, depending on his mood, though the default are the French and of course, the perennial 'mongoose'.

Miriam Lass barely smiles. "Classified."

"Oh come *on*. I'm not asking for details. Like, do you kick in doors and all that? Or is it like spending days poking around in corpses?"

"Depending on the case."

"I can't ever imagine poking around in a corpse. It's so gross. Hanni's - ooh, sorry, pretend you didn't hear that, he'll be so annoyed - Hannibal's talked about past cases, those that are closed, and I'm just freaked out sometimes by how much grossness he can tolerate." He does not mention that he was a surgeon. If she wants to, she will find out anyway.

Her lips press together briefly. "With training, one can get over the... grossness."

Will sinks further down in his chair. "Must be challenging being a woman in the FBI. Is there, you know, a really thick glass ceiling in the agency?" He can't pretend to be too dumb, Hannibal has to have *some* standards.

That topic gets her interest and she starts opening up about the women leaders in the FBI. Will asks some pertinent questions, some silly ones, and thoroughly cultivates the impression of a regular guy with regular intelligence, with expensive tastes cultivated by a worldly older lover.

He does pick up information around what she *doesn't* say.

Lass is ambitious. He admires that - ambition makes people strive. She makes it clear that she wants to take over from Jack Crawford after the man retires, and he gets the impression that Crawford is giving her the opportunity to prove herself.

Which, given what Crawford's personal Moby Dick is, means that she is digging into the Ripper cases with everything she has.

It may be time to discuss escape plans with Hannibal.

*****

The first corpse is a young girl wrapped in a Persian-style rug. The raven-black wig placed over her shaven head is made of real human hair; the eyes false glass orbs of dark blue. She has been carefully made up like a porcelain doll, but even so the mottling of death cannot be fully hidden. An Asian, possibly Korean - Hannibal sneaks a peek at Beverly's taut face, and wonders if she is involved in the small Korean community in the city.

The second is a boy, wrapped in a soft cotton sheet, though at first glance he may have been mistaken for a girl. His wig is a luscious fall of titian red waves, with small white silk flowers woven into it. His eyelids have been glued open and his eyes are milky-white orbs. His freckled skin has been airbrushed over with foundation, but transportation has rubbed some of the makeup off his cheeks. He is too thin, his bones protruding at his joints.

The third is wrapped in muslin, sheer and translucent. Her skin is ebony, her lips painted gold, and her wiry hair carefully woven into a crown, with gold leaves braided into her hair. The killer took her eyes too, replacing them with amber-colored glass eyes, as though she was meant to be a goddess of the sun.

They are dressed in identical white robes that cover from neck to ankle, almost like shrouds. It is altogether lovely to look at all three in a row; Hannibal thinks he may actually draw and paint them. Much as he abhors the murder of children, there is a sensitivity in these kills.

"These children were all taken from their homes," says Jack quietly. "Latch-key kids, small, inner-city apartments. The missing persons reports came in last night, the bodies were found in the afternoon."

"All girls-" Beverly begins.

"No. The redhead is a boy," Price interrupts, pointing with a pen. He hands copies of the autopsy reports to Crawford, Hannibal, and Beverly. "All of them have traces of eszopiclone in their systems."

"Fast acting and long-lasting," says Beverly. She taps the report in her hands. "Didn't want them to suffer."

"They died of carbon monoxide poisoning," Hannibal remarks. He closes the folder. "Children drifting into the arms of death."

Beverly grinds her jaw. "They went too gently into the night."

"The killer has to know these children personally, to know that they are without adult supervision or protection. And to have sent these to the police... How *were* they sent to the police?"

Jack Crawford looks grimmer than usual. The last thing he needs is panic among the population. "A letter was sent to the station. They found the kids in a dumpster outside the back of the station."

"As Agent Katz mentioned, the killer had no desire to hurt her victims." Hannibal walks from one dead child to the other and bends close to look at their faces and necks. No bruising or ligature marks. "The eszopiclone, the carbon monoxide... painless ways to kill. The eszopiclone could have been injected."

Price nods. "I'll check for needle marks, and then run stomach contents for analysis. The eyes were removed posthumously. We're getting their medical records now, but I found traces of head lice on the victims who were shaved. They died with the victims, so I'm going to guess gas chamber."

"She wants them pristine, perfect. She removed the imperfections and, to her mind, made them better." Hannibal straightens up and studies the children. "Redhead, blonde, brunette. Prepubescent boys and girls. Lower middle-class. This killer thinks she's a savior, picking them out of squalor and neglect. She's skilled with blades, and not squeamish. It's unlikely that she used force; there is a tenderness to the way she dressed the victims. I will hazard the guess that she either lured them, or is of a profession that engenders trust in teenagers. Not an authority figure, but close to being one."

"What about the kids? Any details we can give PD?"

Hannibal examines each one again. "As yet there is nothing that jumps out at me about the victims. They were latchkey children, so I would suppose they were taught to be cautious. They would have been hesitant or distrustful of strangers, so she would have been someone they had seen often enough to lose their reticence."

Jack nods as he takes notes. "You're of the opinion it's a woman, though."

"Yes. Women who murder are less likely to resort to brute force." Hannibal shakes his head. "They are also therefore more likely to have long killing sprees. Their methods aren't always visible to casual investigation. This one however wants to be caught, or at least noticed. I fear she has others lined up."

Jack exhales heavily. "I want this one to stop at three. Dr Lecter, thank you for the profile, Jimmy, you'll have to work without Zee. When is he returning?"

"The conference lasts through the weekend."

"Well, let's get this closed before then. Beverly, you're my second on this, coordinate with local PD, and help Jimmy out whenever you need to."

Beverly raises her eyebrows at Jimmy, then asks, "What about Miriam?"

"She'll take the people. Interviews with the families. That would be... educational," says Jack quietly.

They fall silent. Informing parents of a child's death is bad enough; to let them know that it is because they can't afford not to leave their child alone at home... Hannibal feels a swift pang of sorrow, and files that reaction away for perusal after.

"The news are already all over this," Jack continues with a heavy breath. "That's where I'll be."

*****

When Hannibal meets Will and Miriam Lass at the office, he notices that Will isn't *quite* himself. It is familiar, however, and Hannibal has to restrain a smile - this is a performance, the Will that dances with strangers in that club. His boyfriend has tamped down the overt sensuality, but there is a vulpine grace to his limbs that isn't usually present.

"Hey there," says Hannibal. "I'm sorry to keep you both waiting."

"It's alright," says Will, cuing Hannibal in to the little performance he's putting on. "Bye Agent Lass. Nice talking to you."

As they leave, the doctor makes sure to have a hand on the small of Will's back, and the young man instantly leans into his side.

"Bit over the top, yes?" Hannibal asks *sotto voce.*

"She's going to be a threat, Hannibal," Will murmurs, and smiles fondly at him when the older man opens the door for him; an act. There is something glacial behind Will's eyes. "We'll discuss this later."

*****

In the car, Maria Callas sings Madama Butterfly. Her eloquent passion does not thaw Will; he remains cold and thoughtful, the same chilly demeanor he had when they looked into Bernadone's barn. It is the calm of a lake in winter, and Hannibal knows that a monster lurks beneath the ice.

From Madama Butterfly the music moves into Fauré's Sicilienne, and Will's demeanor softens slightly.

"She's probably going over your past cases," he says, just as Hannibal stops for a red light.

The doctor nods. "Jack mentioned something."

"You should have told me."

"There was no reason to. There's no need to take preemptive action in this case," says Hannibal. He places a hand over Will's fist clenched on his knee. "Relax, mon amour."

The young man wrenches his hand from Hannibal. "We're lovers, Hannibal. You have to tell me things that threaten us. Your past may catch up anytime."

"So may your present, but I have no intention of stopping you. I am happy with the way things have turned out."

Will glances over and scoffs. "Of course you are. I'm becoming like you."

"You're becoming what you are meant to be," Hannibal corrects. "I know you remember stabbing your classmates and schoolmates. The violence has always been in you."

Another tense, drawn-out silence falls between the lovers, filled only by Mendelssohn's incongruously romantic On Wings of Song. "Hannibal, you know how I respond to psychoanalysis."

"You also know you've evolved your design. I didn't give you the ideas for Ingram," Hannibal continues, relentless. "Between the two of us, you are the greater risk."

"I'm not a notorious serial killer. Solving the Ripper case will make anyone's career, Hannibal, and her ambition is dangerous," Will snaps.

Hannibal's hands tighten on the wheel. "Are you telling me to stop, now? After you've partaken in the creation?"

"We've stopped the Ripper years ago," says Will, suddenly sounding tired. "I don't want to fight, Hannibal. I just want you to be safe."

They let the conversation stop there, though there are too many words that need saying. Pachelbel's Canon in D takes over and lets each of the men fall into the silence of their own thoughts.

*****

The tension doesn't fade until they have removed their clothes and showered together, and then it is all Will can do not to jump Hannibal inside the bathroom.

I love him, Will thinks ferociously as he watches Hannibal get ready for bed. *I love him so much, and he can't seem to realize how easily all this can be taken from us.*

He waits until the older man has slid under the covers to join him before curling up to Hannibal's side. Hannibal rolls to face Will, his right arm draping over Will's waist, and they nestle together with something close to serenity.

The doctor hums speculatively and slides his hand up Will's shirt. "Sleepy?"

"No," says Will, breath catching in his throat. "I want to take you tonight. May I?"

"Please do."

*****

Hannibal consciously relaxes as Will thrusts into him, slow and careful, the younger man's hands tightening on Hannibal's hips. Will is always worried that he is too rough - as though WIll can ever be too rough for Hannibal - and takes his time to prepare Hannibal thoroughly.

Right now, Hannibal is very aware of the heat of his lover's hands on his skin, of the sweat beading along his lower back and sliding along the line of his spine. There is a faint crackle of static in his head as his perceptions narrow down to the existence of just them. His fingers dig into his pillow and he exhales steadily through his mouth, feeling the stretch in his shoulders and thighs.

Will starts fucking harder, beginning to get caught up in the sensations, and the young man wraps his hand around Hannibal's cock to pump him in time with his rocking thrusts. They don't talk; their breaths and the smack of skin on skin are the only sounds Hannibal registers. Will bends over him, changing the angle of his thrusts, and Hannibal moans softly. Will's faintly stubbled cheek rests just below Hannibal's shoulder and scratches as they move. It feels too warm, even without the sheets, and Hannibal lets himself melt into the feeling of being cherished.

He's urged gently towards his peak, Will's hand skillful and practiced on his arousal. He climaxes with a quiet gasp into his lover's hold, and that tips Will over the edge. The young man tenses and the fingers of his left hand dig painfully into Hannibal's flesh; Hannibal can feel the wet, hot breath on his back, and then the sticky-slick sensation of semen sliding down his leg as Will pulls out.

The younger man leans his cheek on the small of Hannibal's back

Hannibal rests on his belly, content to let his lover take care of him. Will returns after a brief visit to the bathroom and wipes Hannibal down. Then he crawls up the bed and drapes himself all over Hannibal.

"You're crushing me," Hannibal remarks sleepily.

"No I'm not, you're still able to talk."

"Not for long."

With a soft laugh, Will allows Hannibal to roll over, before plastering himself to Hannibal's chest. "So. Tell me about the case."

"Preteens. It's likely to be a woman who's killing," says Hannibal. He's long inured to Will's strange predilection for hearing about the more macabre cases. "This one wants to be found, however. She's reckless."

Will nuzzles under Hannibal's jaw. "How were the kills?"

"She's not interested in the process, merely the outcome." The psychiatrist yawns. The whole host of post-sex hormones racing through his bloodstream is making him sleepy. "Drugs them with sleeping pills and suffocates them with carbon monoxide. Her creations are pretty, but I've yet to see a unifying theme."

"Perhaps there isn't one."

"There is. There's effort put in, but the individuals they've found do not make up a cohesive whole." Hannibal exhales and kisses Will. "Let things be, dear Will. We'll move only when the enemy moves, and not before."

That settles the young man for a few minutes. Eventually, he says, "If she comes after you, kill her."

"That is precisely the plan," says Hannibal quietly. He presses a kiss to Will's brow. "I'll be visiting the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane."

"Why?"

"I will be interviewing a few inmates. Alana wants to co-author an article." Hannibal smiles to himself. "I hope you'll be civil to Chilton when he comes for dinner with Alana."

Knowing that Hannibal intends to use the allure of his exclusive dinner table as honey to sweeten up Chilton, Will doesn't argue against the invitation. "I'll be as civil as he is."

"Good."

"You can say hi to Matthew too, while you're there." Will yawns and burrows closer, feeling unaccountably clingy.

"I will. Go to sleep, mongoose."

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"What *this* do I get in exchange for my *that?"* Chilton asks obnoxiously when Alana puts forth the request. "You're asking to interview half a dozen of my most dangerous patients. I can't imagine the amount of work needed to ensure that you and Dr Bloom remain safe."

Alana is growing visibly impatient, but she holds on to her good manners. Clearing her throat, she says, "They need not leave their cells, Dr Chilton. All we need is speak to them, and once we've found someone to interview in depth, we can meet in the privacy room."

"I'm well-trained in self-defense, Frederick," Hannibal adds. "Needless to say, I am also assured of the high standards of your orderlies and nurses."

Chilton leans back in his chair and puts on an expression that Hannibal thiks is meant to make the administrator look calculating and insightful, but in actual fact makes him look

constipated. He smiles thinly. "You've not answered my question. What do I get in exchange for allowing both of you access to my most prized patients?"

Hannibal is certain that particular slip of the tongue is unintentional. Nevertheless, it does make Alana narrow her lovely eyes in distaste. "What would you like?"

"I'd suggest co-authorship, but I'm well aware that neither of you will consider that an acceptable option. I therefore would like a word from both of you to the FBI. Being a consultant to the FBI would reflect well on my administration," says Chilton, his fingers playing idly over the head of his pretentious silver-topped cane.

Hannibal looks over at Alana, and then smiles affably at Chilton. "Of course. I'm sure Jack Crawford will appreciate your assistance."

"That's settled then. You are going to screen them today?"

"Of course. And, before I forget, Alana, Frederick, I would be most glad to have you both over for dinner. We can discuss today's findings."

The corner of Chilton's mouth twitches. For years he has been angling for an invite to Hannibal's table, so when he says ungraciously, "What time should we be there?", it is an admission that he recognizes it as a manipulative technique and that it has worked.

Hannibal smiles. "Seven-thirty. Will is going to be delighted."

*****

Matthew is filing the month's medical reports when Barney came over to him.

"Hey Barney, what's up?" says the lanky nurse, typing up the entries for Silas Ferris into the system.

The big man pulls over a chair and sits next to the desk. "You talk to Abel Gideon lately?"

"No," says Matthew slowly. "He talked at me that one time I delivered his meal, and that was it. I've not gone down to that wing since. Why?"

"He's been asking about you. I told the other guys not to say anything, but I think perhaps Klein or Nash told him something about you. Just now, when I was bringing down his mail, he asked me after your sister."

Matthew feels his throat tighten and a tingle of apprehension slides down his spine like a knife. He makes himself sound casual. "What did he know about Esther?"

"Her name, and that she's special to you," says Barney gravely. "You be careful, yeah? The last person Gideon got interested in, he removed her eyes and impaled her with an IV stand. Don't be alone with him, ever."

"Thanks, Barney," says Matthew with a tiny smile. "I ap-appreciate that."

"You're a decent kid. Hate for some sick bastard to get fixated on you."

Nash pokes his head in at the door. "Hey, Brown, some fancy-ass Dr Lecter asking for you. Get your ass to the boss's office, yeah?"

*****

Upon seeing Dr Lecter and the beautiful Dr Bloom, Matthew brightens considerably. The unease after hearing Barney's message fades slightly.

"Dr Lecter, Dr Bloom, hi. Dr Chilton, good afternoon."

"... Matthew, right? You didn't mention being friends with Dr Lecter."

"I'm best friends w-with Will Graham," says Matthew hesitantly, receiving a slight nod from Dr Lecter. "I didn't know you'd want to know."

"See them to block C, will you? Stay with them as they conduct their interviews."

Block C is where Abel Gideon is housed. Matthew pauses. "Sir, can't I ask someone else? I'm in the middle of updating patient records."

"You can do that after you see them through their tasks," says Chilton, and shuts the door on them.

Dr Lecter must have picked up on Matthew's reluctance and distress. "Is something wrong?"

"Um..." Matthew glances at Dr Bloom on the right, and shrugs. "It's no big deal. Abel Gideon's been asking about me, that's all. Barney thinks he's, um... he's fixating on me. And block C is where he's housed."

"Is he now?" Dr Lecter looks thoughtful. "How about you escort us downstairs, and then have an orderly keep us company? I don't see why he should be encouraged in his obsession."

Dr Bloom agrees. "True. He's been quite violent towards objects of his obsessions in the past. The less he knows of you, the better."

Matthew is glad he has their support, and when Nash agrees to take the doctors to their interviews, he feels relieved. Dr Lecter does place a hand on his shoulder as he passes, as though reassuring Matthew that there is nothing to worry about. He should not feel that disappointed that he won't get to see Abel Gideon and learn more about the other man. However, he will not risk Esther.

Nothing is worth risking his precious baby sister.

Chapter End Notes

Maria Callas - Madama Butterfly
Gabriel Fauré - Sicilienne
Mendelssohn - On Wings of Song
Pachelbel's Canon in D

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Such an elegant house. So unfortunate that these paintings don't quite fit the rest of the decor," Chilton comments as he wanders around the main sitting room.

Will forces a tight smile. He's been tasked to play the host, though right now he likes nothing more that to shove one of Hannibal's many antelope horn ornaments through the pretentious little man with his stupid silver-topped cane. He's willing to settle for having Winston or buster crap in Chilton's car. "I commissioned those. They're the soundwaves of us saying each other's names."

"That's very sweet," Alana remarks. She has seen the two framed prints before, of course, but Hannibal and Will seldom share such private details.

However, Chilton's presence makes Will want to throw everything in his face, show the second-rate psychiatrist everything in Hannibal's life that Chilton lacks. It's painfully obvious even to Will that Chilton wants to be Hannibal. The suit, the deliberate cadence of his words, that ridiculous and unnecessary cane... Every single encounter Will has had with Chilton at the society functions has helped Will formulate an impression of the man, and to see him here in their home is making Will's hackles rise to an alarming degree.

Thankfully Alana Bloom is here, her very presence a balm. Also, Will has put on the Goldberg variations in the background, which both he and Hannibal love to play on their respective instruments. Lastly, Will is very privately amused that Hannibal has to prepare an all-vegetarian dish due to Chilton's dietary limitations. The older man had bemoaned the fact earlier, before their guests arrived, and Will had to soothe the cannibal's sensibilities. Of course Hannibal had a recipe in mind, he just hated doing meatless meals.

Honestly, with all the red meat and offal that Hannibal and Will partake, it's a wonder they can endure the taste of each other's ejaculate. Perhaps that is why Hannibal plies them both with so much fruit, to counter the nasty effect his preferred diet has on their semen. The thought makes Will smirk into his glass of petit sirah. Hannibal is a gourmand of the highest level, so it's not beyond the realm of consideration that whatever he has Will eating is to flavor Will at the most base level.

Alana peers curiously at Will. "Something funny?"

"I remembered something from work is all," Will lies easily. He excuses himself to the kitchen, more than happy to leave her alone to entertain Chilton.

In the kitchen, Hannibal is plating. He glances at Will as his boyfriend comes over and steals a smidge of micro-greens. "How's the company?"

"Barely tolerable, but he'll live."

With a gentle smile, Hannibal kisses Will briefly on the temple and asks him to usher Alana and Chilton to the table.

*****

"Fredrick, you have tested me," says Hannibal, serving up the main dish. "It has been years since I made a dish without any meat. Beet carpaccio, garnished with beetroot foam and drizzled with porcini emulsion."

"I lost a kidney," says Chilton. "I have to watch my protein intake."

Originally Hannibal intended to take the chair at the head of the table, but Beverly isn't here, so they are now seated facing two to two.

Will sits, taking the chair facing Alana, and smiles blandly at Chilton. "You didn't lose it, Dr Chilton, Abel Gideon carved it out of you. Thank goodness he's incarcerated and in your facility now."

He gets a look from the administrator and a dark micro-smile from Hannibal for that jibe. Hannibal enjoys it when Will is like this, all barbs hidden in civility. Chilton is in for a hard time tonight - the wounds dealt to his ego will last far longer than the dinner.

"Sauteed beet greens and pork tenderloin for the rest of us," says the doctor, carefully placing the plate in front of Alana before going to his side of the table to serve his boyfriend and himself.

Will beams sweetly up at Hannibal, laying on the act a little thickly, before he looks across the table at Alana. "I wish Beverly could have come."

"She's tracking down wig makers and glass eyes," says Alana.

Hannibal starts on his own plate. "How's the wine?"

Chilton swirls his wine and takes a sip. "Odd to pair red wine with beets."

"I'm really more of a beer person," Alana confesses with a sweet smile.

"Oaky," says Will. He's still developing his palate. "I read somewhere that you're supposed to pair vegetables with white or rose wines."

"The petit sirah is an unconventional choice, and all the more surprising for it," says Hannibal, in his culinary chef mode.

"Unconventional and divine." Will sips delicately. "If you ever decide to retire from being a psychiatrist, you should be a sommelier. You'll be fantastic at it."

Hannibal smiles indulgently. "I have the benefit of my nose."

Chilton tries the beets and hums appreciatively. "Noses are under-appreciated. The olfactory sense is such a powerful weapon."

Nodding, Alana chimes in. "A smell can take you back in time. I can't smell almond chocolate cookies without thinking about my grandmother baking in her tiny, green kitchen, flour up her arms and a wooden spoon to keep us from stealing mouthfuls of batter."

"Pascal claimed that the nose with the greatest impact on history was Cleopatra's," says Chilton. "These are delicious, Dr Lecter."

"Perhaps Pascal placed too much emphasis on her appearance and not enough on her native qualities," Will says. He smiles coyly at Hannibal. "But your nose is very fine too."

"Thank you for the reassurance, Will."

That little demonstration of domestic bliss must have caused Chilton some discomfort, because Alana immediately attempts to pour oil on troubled waters. "I think we've come to a consensus to interview Katherine Pimms for our article."

"Pimms... she's the one who committed the lobotomy and made the, the human apiary," says Chilton, frowning faintly. "She rambles in our sessions. I'm not certain there's much to restore of her mind."

"I found her entirely lucid," says Hannibal. "And female psychopaths are so very rare."

"Rarer to have one in captivity."

Will nonchalantly spears a bite of tenderloin. "Must be nice, having a zoo of patients for you to poke at whenever you want and however you want."

Chilton bristles. "I treat them to help fix whatever's broken in them."

The young man bares his teeth in a mimicry of a smile. "Maybe there isn't anything broken. Maybe they were made this way."

"Society needs psychopaths to keep the rest of us on our toes," Alana interjects. "It's a fascinating area of study, one that I have not yet found a definitive answer to."

"There isn't one," says Hannibal, topping up the wineglasses. "All humans are variables, and some variables are ugly. Bad math, as it were."

"Your paper on social exclusion certainly argues for the latter," says Chilton to Hannibal. "Ever thought of continuing that particular avenue of research?"

Hannibal makes a wry expression. "I find myself reluctant to visit my thoughts from an earlier time, lest I cringe at the immaturity and incompleteness of the paper. Besides, so many others more learned than I have explored this avenue of research."

Will nods. "Still, I think your paper explained it the most clearly. And I'm not biased, I'm stating a fact. I'm a layman and I could understand what you were saying."

"You may have an unfair advantage over deciphering my thoughts," says Hannibal fondly. "You have had sufficient practice over the past few years."

Alana grins. "I've been trying to persuade Hannibal to write a book for years, Will. Maybe you can convince him, and succeed where I fail."

The young man chuckles. "I'm not sure I want to share that brilliant mind with the rest of the psychiatric community."

Everyone at the table knows that Chilton has had a few books out, and that despite his proliferate output, respect within the psychiatric community eludes him but clings to Hannibal.

Alana smiles crookedly. "Selfish of you, Will."

"Possessive, not selfish," Will amends, and darts another loving glance at Hannibal, keenly aware that Chilton is watching their interactions. "Anyway, it's all up to him."

"I am happy in what I have achieved." Hannibal tops up their glasses, except for Chilton's - the administrator's dietary limitations include alcohol.

Will takes his hand and squeezes it. "And I have to find my own achievements."

"Have you thought of a course you'd like to take in college?" asks Alana.

Dr Chilton perks up subtly. "I was under the impression that Will is already a college student."

"No, I'm a high school dropout," Will says, lowering his gaze. Hannibal squeezes his hand this time, a quiet rebuke for the teasing. Will continues, "Now that I am more stable, I believe I should take up higher education. I've not quite decided, but I have narrowed down the field. I'll be taking the private tests in early November; I should have made a decision by then."

Alana exchanges a small, private smile with Hannibal. Will frowns. There's a story in there somewhere. Still, this is not the time nor place for them to discuss this.

The conversation turns to the many options in Maryland and New York, and for all his faults, Chilton does have extensive knowledge of who's who in the various faculties in the more prominent departments. Alana pushes for Johns Hopkins; Chilton advocates Annapolis.

"Honestly, I'm mostly worried about my school-leaver status." Will hums with delight over dessert - profiteroles with dark chocolate sauce. "I don't have extra-curricular activities that can help me."

Alana wrinkles her nose. "But you'll have strong letters of recommendation. Hannibal aside, your boss at Curtis Restorations, myself, Beverly, heck, I'm sure even Jack will be willing to write something for you."

"Imagine getting letters from the FBI recommending a student," Will remarks with a broad grin. "They'll be so terrified that I'll be admitted instantly."

"And you'll be under their attentive eye until you matriculate," says Hannibal, almost chiding in his tone, but the affection is obvious.

The entire dinner display has served to make Chilton feel excluded despite finally being included at Hannibal's table. It is perversely pleasurable to provide Chilton with exactly what he has desired for so long and to color it with what he cannot have.

He almost wishes he can see Will's expression. The young man has never quite forgiven Chilton his insinuations about Hannibal's relationship with Will, nor the frequent snide comments, nor the obvious envy. It's adorable how Will feels he has to be offended on Hannibal's behalf.

The doctor takes care to be as charming as Will is acerbic, and by the end of the evening it's fairly clear Chilton can't decide if he enjoyed dinner at all.

For his part, Hannibal is satisfied with that outcome. He does not need Chilton as a friend, but he does not wish to alienate him so much that the other psychiatrist starts to become overly antagonistic.

Hannibal has other plans for Chilton.

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"What are some of your earliest memories?" Will asks the next morning during the break in their morning run with the dogs.

Hannibal mulls over his mind palace. Eventually, he says, "My earliest memory was walking with my father out into the yard. The dew was frozen on the stone path, and my father's sleeve was damp. It was chilly and foggy. I remember the delight at seeing my breath puffing into clouds." The older man shakes his head. "I can't truly recall my father's face now, it has been too long. I know I have his eyes. But the warmth of his hand and the faint smell of nicotine clinging to his fingers are still vivid."

"That sounds lovely," says Will, licking his lower lip.

Winston's tongue is lolling from his mouth as he pads along; the dog is an enthusiastic runner. Buster is straining at the leash, whining to be carried - a bad habit that Hannibal has indulged - and it is a stern click from Will that shuts the smaller dog up. Hannibal croons at Buster, only to be nudged in the ribs.

"You spoil him," the young man scolds, and then cocks his head. "You are such a loving man. I wonder if that comes from your mother or father."

"Possibly neither," says Hannibal. His mouth presses together; Will touches his arm. They both know who Hannibal is thinking of. The older man smiles at his boyfriend. "What about you? What is your earliest memory?"

"Ducklings. I remember ducklings."

"You'll have to elaborate, mon rêve."

"I remember being next to a pond, throwing crumbs at ducklings. Maybe there was a duck. But there was the smell of water, and mud, and, well, duck. Bright day, green grass... Summery. And the tickle of long hair when I was carried." Will exhales heavily. "I can't remember if I ever saw her face, but I think that was my mom. I'd like it to have been."

Hannibal kisses Will on the brow despite the sweat, and they smile at each other before turning towards home. They jog back in silence, the sun just beginning to spread fingers of coral and golden light into the sky.

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"You have been avoiding me, Matthew."

Matthew's spine feels a tingle of *something*, and his posture turns rigid. He clamps his jaw shut as the orderlies wheel Abel Gideon into the check-up room. Dr Freyman is there for the routine medical examination, the doctor practiced and quick in taking down the necessary information. Gideon doesn't give any trouble to the doctor either. He is secured with thick restraints, and the orderlies stay in the room to watch the man. Yet Gideon manages to focus exclusively on Matthew, to the extent that everyone else can sense the tension between Gideon and the nurse.

Matthew says absolutely nothing, not even making eye contact with Gideon. He keeps his gaze on the records before him, noting down whatever Dr Freyman says.

"Aw, don't give me the cold shoulder now, Matthew, you needn't worry that you'll receive the same treatment as the other one." Abel Gideon's slow drawl is sinuous and intrusive, a viper insinuating itself into the crevices. "You're not the slut she was. You're this careful little thing, perched on a branch, ready to take flight, but watching all the time. You're *interesting*."

"Stop talking to me," Matthew hisses, and then bites down on the side of his cheek, hating that he's engaged Gideon.

The man is delighted, not even heeding the needle sliding into his arm to draw blood for testing. "I'll stop talking to you when you start talking to me."

Matthew darts a pleading glance at the orderlies. One of them, an old-timer named Chung, nods in understanding, but they can't do anything to Gideon until Dr Freyman is done with the patient. Thankfully, Gideon is content staring at Matthew and only bids him goodbye after the check-up is over.

Dr Freyman is silent until the orderlies and Gideon have disappeared from view. "You should have mentioned that Gideon is curious about you, Matthew."

"I'm sorry. I-I wasn't, um. I didn't think he'd be like that with other people around."

"Have you informed Dr Chilton?" asks Dr Freyman.

The mere thought of it makes Matthew sick. Knowing Chilton as he does now, the chief administrator will only want to goad Abel Gideon. Matthew shakes his head. "It didn't seem a big deal."

Dr Freyman frowns. She taps her fountain pen against her chin. "Do you want me to tell him?"

"No, please don't," says Matthew immediately, casting his gaze down.

Dr Freyman claps him on the shoulder. "Then we shan't. The next one is coming, so prepare a new entry."

Before he can do so, the alarm sounds. The intercom buzzes. *"All guards report to Block C, Cell 322. Patient holding orderly Chung hostage."*

"That's Abel Gideon's cell," Matthew blurts out.

Matthew excuses himself from Dr Freyman, ignoring her order for him to stay put. He knows in his gut that this has something to do with him. He *knows.*

He skids to a standstill at the end of the long corridor leading to Gideon's cell. The guards are outside, Gideon and Chung inside. Like him, some of the other nurses and orderlies have come as well. Chung is well-respected.

"Come now, my request is eminently simple," Gideon's voice floats out from inside his cell. "Get Matthew Brown to come here and I'll let this one go."

Matthew takes a step forward, but O'Malley stops him. "He killed a nurse once, Matthew. Stay here."

"Let him go, Gideon, or we will shoot," warns one of the guards.

"You'll have to shoot him first, and I will jam this into his carotid artery. Matthew Brown?"

Dr Chilton trots down and the click of his cane distracts Matthew. The administrator ignores the clustered orderlies and nurses and strides straight to the cell.

"Abel, what is this whole... charade for?"

Gideon's soft laugh makes Matthew's skin twitch. "Good. You're here, let's talk. You want to resume my therapy, I want to talk to a young nurse, the new one. Matthew Brown. Give me time to see him, talk with him, and I'll let you examine my brain all over again."

"Forgive me if you don't seem too persuasive," says Chilton with a sneer.

"I will kill this man in my arms."

"You've already killed four people from my hospital, do you think we'll let you get away with more?"

"It's a simple request, Frederick. You can even record the conversations, I know you and your little eavesdropping system." Gideon sounds bored. "Or we see how far we can get blood up the wall-"

"Wait," Matthew blurts out, and runs over. He does not want Chung's death on his hands.

Gideon sees him and brightens. "Ah. Matthew. How nice of you to join us."

Matthew takes a deep, calming breath, and thinks about what he intends to say. "I-I'm here, so, um. Please. Let him go."

Gideon tilts his head and narrows his eyes. His smile deepens and Matthew can see why the man would have been considered attractive before. "Alright. You've asked so nicely. Dr Chilton, what about it? Do we have a deal? You have this handsome young thing assisting you in our therapy sessions and I will take any test you want to throw at me."

Matthew knows he's lost any leverage in this the moment Abel Gideon offered that. Chilton agrees with almost unseemly haste. Still, the nurse is relieved that Chung walks out unscathed.

"You didn't need to do that, kid," says Chung, white-faced from shock. "I'm grateful for it all the same."

*****

"You what?"

Matthew cringes from the cell phone. "Look. It was an emergency."

"An emergency that feeds into his obsession with you! The last time he was obsessed with a nurse, he blinded her and impaled her with an IV stand!" Will sounds aggrieved. *"I'm worried about you. That man is not safe to be around."*

"I'm not going to be alone with him, Will, relax," says Matthew, flicking through the tabs of his browser until he finds a page on reading together with autistic children. "Anyway, you sure you don't want me there to take a photo of the big moment?"

Will is effectively distracted. *"No, I don't think so. We both have good memories and, well, I'd like it really private."*

"Is it for sex reasons? You're gonna have proposal sex, aren't you?"

"Matthew Brown!" Will sounds scandalized. *"That is possibly the most appalling thing you can suggest."*

"You're not denying it."

"... Shut up."

*****

After Will hangs up, Matthew finally tries to decide how he feels.

He truly is wary of Gideon. There is a maelstrom of madness in that man, and like all storms, it is both terrifying and deeply fascinating. Yet Matthew wants to know *why* Gideon has done all that he did, including the latest escapade to have Matthew participate in his therapy sessions. He wants to know if he also has that same strand of chaos woven into his DNA, something that will unravel once the correct thread is pulled.

Will obviously disapproves, but Matthew wonders what Dr Lecter is likely to say once he knows that Chilton has essentially whored Matthew out to get Gideon to take the tests. He has the feeling that, given a different time and place, Dr Lecter will just as likely do the same.

It's a comforting thought that they are *not* in a different time and place.

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There is little headway made in the Doll Maker case. The new jackals that run Tattle Crime have plastered their site with news, together with images that some stupid police rookie took of the victims before the FBI took over. A minor panic has settled over the city, and it became worse when the team are told to travel to North Carolina. Another two have been found, via an unsealed letter stuck into the mayor's letterbox.

While he does not admire the killer's aesthetic nor his chosen prey, there is something alluring about the brassiness of the killer's taunts. He hasn't gone with the BAU; the profile hasn't changed, though now they have narrowed down to an age range as well as income group. Regardless, Jack Crawford has sent over the details.

"I'm not so sure it's a woman though," Will comments one evening after he's read another article from a more reputable paper. "For all that the murders are painless, there's something nearly callous about the choice of victim, and the whole... dress-up thing."

"What do you feel it is?"

"A social commentary, perhaps? The killer chooses kids that have been left to take care of themselves. Usually, latchkey kids are more mature emotionally than their peers. They have to be. And they're found removed of signs of them being kids. You know, the wigs and the eyes."

Finishing his glass of wine, Hannibal joins Will at the chaise longue. "Tell me."

"Hairdos. These wigs-" Will shuffles the photos - Hannibal doesn't hide them from his lover, the whole concept of case confidentiality useless to them - and points out the intricate styling. "They're styled too old for them. She's what, eleven? Twelve? And the eyes, I'm guessing... I'm guessing the killer took them if they weren't full of childlike innocence."

"Eyes are the windows to the soul," says Hannibal, turning the idea over in his head. "He dresses them in clothes that are not their own, in styles not their own. Even the latest two

have been remade." He loops his arm around Will and pulls the young man closer. "I've not been a child since that winter. Tell me, who would a prepubescent adolescent trust?"

Will nibbles on his lip. He starts listing them on his fingers: "Friends, for sure; siblings; a neighbor they grew up socializing with; some teachers. Not parents or police or doctors though."

Hannibal agrees. "At that age they're starting to stretch their wings. Authority figures will not be well-received."

"Maybe a nun." Will nuzzles under Hannibal's cheek. "Maybe you're looking for a murder nun."

"Perhaps." Hannibal strokes Will's side, his mind partially distracted by the new avenues of thought being opened up by Will's observations.

"And I know what course I want to apply to in university," says Will.

That derails Hannibal's original train of thought. He tightens his arm around his lover. "What is it?"

"Music education," says Will. He turns to look at Hannibal. "UM School of Music. It's about an hour's drive daily, but I can commute, so we don't have to be separated."

The doctor smiles warmly and kisses his lover. The kiss is meant to be brief, but Hannibal deepens it, sharp teeth nipping teasingly at Will's lips until they are tasting each other. The two indulge until Will pulls away with a soft huff.

"I think you like that idea," says Will with a cheeky grin.

"Oh, very much," says Hannibal. "But you have an aptitude for the psychological. Why not pursue that?"

"You know, I originally thought of psychology or psychiatry, but then people will think I'm riding on your coattails whatever I attain in the future." Will shifts so he's lying on Hannibal, back to stomach. "Besides, I do enjoy music. So I can open a music shop, and restore pianos, and teach music to kids. Maybe set up a special class for disadvantaged kids like I used to be."

The young man's tone is wistful. Hannibal runs his elegant surgeon's fingers through wild curls. "That is an admirable aim, mon amour."

"Music saved me," says Will quietly. "Kept me sane, when everything else had gone to shit. Dad gave me something to protect my mind with. Wish I could have thanked him for it."

Hannibal keeps his opinion about the late Dave Graham behind his own teeth.

Will continues, "It'll give me a chance to work with my hands, and I won't get that with psychology."

"In some ways you're still your father's son," says Hannibal.

Will snuggles into Hannibal's embrace. "Yeah. But I'm yours now. For the rest of our life, together."

"Yes, you are." The older man kisses the crown of Will's head. "Tu priklausai man, ir niekam kitam."

"I know the first part," says Will. "The second bit?"

Hannibal hides his smile in rich chocolate curls. "You belong to me, and no one else."

Will laughs, and murmurs, "Aš priklausau tau, my darling Ripper."

Chapter End Notes

Bach Goldberg Variations
And yes, diet does affect the taste of semen.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You really are too particular," Will complains, helping to take down the painting over yet another mantel to switch over the artwork. "No one really pays attention to what we put on our walls, except to make conversation during your parties. I'm probably the only one who takes note of all of these."

Hannibal raises his brows. "You don't have to fish for compliments, mon amour."

"I wasn't." Will rolls his eyes, and then hops down from the stool he is standing on. "Okay. What's this one called?"

"It's a vanitas still life, by Pierfrancesco Cittadini." Hannibal takes Will by the hand and tugs him over to stand in a loose embrace. "A replica of it anyway."

Will frowns at it. "You really have to stop putting up art with bones and skulls. I don't remember seeing this one in the storeroom."

"No, I had it in a separate storage unit," says Hannibal. He nibbles on Will's ear. "Vanitas are contemplations on the brevity of life."

"People might think you are obsessed with death, my dear Hannibal."

The doctor smiles and kisses Will's temple. "Death is what gives life meaning. Without it, we will stagnate. Knowing that we all will meet death, we seek to make the most of life. Art, music, food, sex, travel... Someday soon, we will visit Europe, and I will take you to all the places that have become my memory palace. Piazzas and cathedrals and castles and monasteries."

"I like architecture, but I also love nature."

"Lakes and mountains and valley and fields upon fields of ripening wheat, and vineyards full of grapes darkening in the sun. We'll sample wines and walk barefoot on rich earth."

With a soft laugh, Will swivels around in Hannibal's arms and loops his own over the older man's shoulders. "That sounds perfect."

"It does, doesn't it?" The doctor smiles at Will warmly. "Let's go next spring, you and I. Two months traveling together."

Will beams at him, and pulls him in for a thorough and sweet kiss. "Do you know what I'm going to do to make the most of life?"

"No, but I have a feeling you're going to tell me." Hannibal lets his fingers creep under his lover's shirt. His hands are batted away.

"I'm going to put on some music, and you are going to teach me to waltz." Will grins. "Then, when we are in Venice, we shall waltz in the middle of the Piazza San Marco under the moonlight."

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Their first session has Matthew sweating his palms. He rubs them on his pants discreetly as the orderlies escort Gideon in and strap him into the chair, before cuffing his wrists. They order him to open his hands and show them his palms before they retreat. The bubbling sense of anticipation and dread becomes more agitated when Abel Gideon looks up and smiles like a snake at Matthew.

"Hello there," the man says, the cat with a canary under its paw.

Chilton takes a seat facing the man. Matthew remains in the corner of the treatment room.

Gideon cocks his head. "Come now, don't be shy."

"Matthew is here as you requested. He is under no obligation to participate or communicate with you," says Chilton firmly. He slides a thin stack of papers across the steel table. "I want your signature on these - and no funny business, Gideon."

"What are these?"

"Indemnity forms. I can't be certain you aren't lying to me, so I will be using a cocktail of chemicals to ensure you don't." He nods at Nash and Villin, the two orderlies, and they step forward, one to hold a pen with Gideon, the other to make sure the man does not sneak the pen away. "This is my hospital after all."

"Yes it is." Gideon catches Matthew's eye, and winks as he signs the documents. He leans back as far as his cuffed hands will allow. When Harris, the other nurse, steps forward to prepare the injections, Gideon shifts and tenses up his muscles.

"Gideon. You've signed the forms," Chilton chides.

The patient raises an eyebrow. "I know. Let Matthew handle the injections, hmm?"

Matthew feels something tingle down the tight line of his spine, and he swallows dryly and averts his gaze. However, he does the swabbing and injecting, and no one in the room misses seeing how hungrily Gideon watches the young nurse prepare him. Soon the psychoactive medications are seeping into Gideon's bloodstream.

"Thank you, darling," he whispers.

That sends a shudder through Matthew, equal parts revulsion and fascination. "Don't call me that."

Gideon's smile only grows wider.

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It does not get better. Gideon goes into nauseating detail for everything, including his thoughts when he murdered each of his victims and his techniques, even about the time he was disemboweling Chilton.

Throughout the whole session, Gideon does not look at the psychiatrist.

His gaze never leaves Matthew's face.

*****

While Chilton was stoic throughout the session with Gideon, once the patient has been taken away, Chilton asks Matthew, "Are you sure you wish to continue assisting me? He seems dangerously obsessed with you, and I can tell he is affecting you."

"Dr Chilton, I'm alright. I can do this. I just have to be present, after all."

"I'm not a monster, Matthew. If you're not okay with it, let me know. I can and will be more than pleased to take away his privileges." The administrator pats the young man's shoulder and strides off, the tapping of his cane slightly out of sync with his steps. In the gloom of the corridor, Chilton seems more solitary than ever.

Matthew thinks he may have misunderstood his boss, and then shudders with revolted fascination when he recalls the look of naked curiosity on Gideon's face just before he was taken away.

*****

He can't feel clean enough. It's been nearly an hour since he reached home, and maybe four hours since that single session, yet he still feels crusted over with something sticky and sickening. The way Abel Gideon kept staring at him... It wasn't sexual, yet Matthew feels violated. Like his insides have been picked over, or the folds of his brain examined with a magnifying glass.

The man even talked about his sexual fantasies, all of which involved his late wife, and all the time he had pinned Matthew with the intensity of his dark gaze, watching Matthew's reactions.

Matthew wishes he can erase all the thoughts that are clinging to his gray matter. Take out his brain, scrub it free of Gideon's scrutiny and words and strangely revolting and intriguing existence.

The young man scrubs and scrubs and scrubs and scrubs until his skin is practically raw. His hair is plastered to his scalp, his fingertips and toes have pruned up, and he still feels disgusted by himself.

"Mattie, it's time for dinner. You gotta have dinner Mattie," Esther calls from outside the door. "Mattie?"

"Leave me alone for fuck's sakes!" he shouts, still trying not to think of how it felt to be stared at so blatantly by another psychopath. "You can have dinner all by your fucking self!"

He catches himself too late, and then he hears the wail erupt from his sister. Swearing under his breath, Matthew scrambles out of the shower, quickly pulls on his pants, and yanks open the door. He has never yelled at her in her entire life, so this has shocked the girl.

Esther is bawling, hiding her face in her forearms as she sits on the floor and rocks herself. Mortified and abjectly apologetic, Matthew crouches down and pets her head, her cheeks. "Sweetie, sweetheart, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to shout at you, sweetie, I'm sorry, I'm a bad person, baby girl, please stop crying-"

She twists away from him and burrows her face even deeper. Her cries are now huge, gasping and choking sobs.

His heart wrenches and he rubs his hands over his cheeks. "Sweetheart, please look at me, look at Mattie sweetie," he pleads. "Esther, please, I'm really sorry."

Their mother finally emerges from the kitchen to see what's wrong, and she scowls at Matthew. "What did you say to her?"

"I yelled at her. Baby I'm sorry, please, stop crying, please look at me."

Esther turns into her mother's side. She's still crying, and with every sob Matthew feels as though a knife stabs into his heart. He covers his mouth and then his own eyes. "Mom, could you- I'm gonna head out to Will's for a bit. Is that okay? Can you help calm her down?"

"Of course, she's my daughter," his mother says. She sweeps Esther's hair from her face - the girl still has her eyes squeezed shut - and says, "We'll go get ice cream after you go. She'll be this way for a bit, you know that, and your being here ain't helping. Leave the car."

Reluctantly he has to concede the point. He grabs a bowling shirt hanging just inside his door, and strides out, with one last glance cast behind him at his sister and mother, heads out to the bus stop.

"Will? Are you at home?" he asks once his friend picks up the phone.

"No, Danielle, Johnny, and Caleb dragged me out to a pub. Some sort of - What's it? You've gotta be kidding me - it's karaoke night and they want me to join them. Tell me you can save me from this horror. No, Dany, I am emphatically not singing. I don't know any songs!"

Matthew chuckles, but he sounds tense even to himself. "Yeah. I, uh, I need to unload, and I don't have the car. Where do I meet you?"

*****

They're drinking. To be exact, Matthew is drinking beer, while Will enjoys a Coke. They have a table, near the entrance, and Will listens to Matthew pour out the entire distasteful experience of being *ogled* at by Abel Gideon.

"Made me feel like a piece of meat," Matthew says glumly. "And of course I bring the bad mood back and I yelled at Esther - I don't yell at her, I never yell at her, for fuck's sake. One session, one goddamn session where I said absolutely *nothing*, and I lose my composure."

"Matthew, I think I'm only gonna say this once," says Will seriously. "You need to get laid. "

"Wh- The fuck, Will, you never say things like that," Matthew sputters.

The other young man shrugs. "You're all tense. Maybe if you can find an outlet for all that negativity-"

"And having sex is something you consider an outlet?"

"Well, sex gets you doped up on dopamine and serotonin and oxytocin..."

Matthew glares at his best friend. "Yeah I know, hormones released during sex make you feel good. But seriously, Will, I feel like my brain was the one being picked at, not his. Like he was squirming in my marrow."

"Ew. That is a disgusting image." Will grimaces.

"Felt even more disgusting."

"So, either sex or a good yell or something. How was Esther when you left?" he asks, signaling for another drink for both of them.

"Still crying."

"Mm. But, you know, ice cream. She'll have forgiven you by the time you get back."

Matthew sighs. "I hope so. She's never had to deal with my temper before." He drains his beer and signals for another one. "Enough about me and my screw-ups today. You? Anything interesting?"

Will wrinkles his nose. "I've decided on applying to UM School of Music. I'm gonna be taking my SATs privately in November, and then get letters of recommendations since I don't have extra-curricular activities, and maybe finagle an interview or something with the faculty if I don't make the cut."

Grimacing, Matthew says, "I hated the SATs. But, lucky for you, I still have my notes and guidebooks. You may have to check if they're outdated. It's been years after all."

"Thanks, Mattie," says Will, clinking his soda against his friend's bottle. "Come on, we'll have one more, and then I'll drive you home. We have work tomorrow."

*****

They pull up about an hour later. Will is surprised to see two persons waiting by a patrol car, presumably police, and is thankful he didn't drink and drive. One of them is an African-

American woman, broad and round-faced; the other is a grizzled man with a salt-and-pepper beard.

"Hi. I'm Detective Hayden. This is my partner Detective Merrick." They flash their badges.

Will's brow creases. "Hi. Why are you here?"

"Which of you is, uh, Amanda Brown's son?" the woman asks, referring to her tiny notepad.

Matthew immediately tenses. "I am. What's wrong?"

Instead of answering him, she says, "Where have you been earlier this evening?"

"Out at a pub with my friend," says Matthew, pointing at Will with his thumb. "What's wrong?" he repeats, more forcefully; Will grabs his elbow and keeps him from stepping forward into the detective's personal space.

"I think we should talk inside," Detective Hayden says quietly. "Why don't we go in?"

The two young men don't move.

"Let's go inside." Detective Merrick nods, his eyes taking in the two young men's body language. As Matthew unlocks his door, the detective asks, "You two dating?"

"No," says Will shortly. "We're best friends."

The four file into the living room, Matthew clearing away Esther's school supplies from the sofa. The two detectives take the single chairs, leaving Will and Matthew to sit together on the couch.

"Sit down, guys," says Hayden. Her eyes are very kind but somber. "Matthew, we have bad news. We found your mother in a parking lot in Northwest Plaza. She was shot in the heart. She still had her driver's license, that's how we know she lived here."

Instinctively, Will reaches for Matthew's hand and grips it.

Hayden continues, "We need you to come to the station to verify-"

"-where's Esther?" Matthew interrupts.

"Esther?"

"My little sister," Matthew says, his voice rigid, and then steadily increases in volume. "Where is my little sister?"

The two detectives straighten in unison.

"We didn't see any trace-"Hayden begins but Matthew snarls and cuts him off.

"She was with Mom, they went out to get ice cream. *Where. Is. My. Baby. Sister?"*

*****

It's rare he has dinner alone. Hannibal has just finished wiping down his counters, humming along to Tchaikovsky, when he hears the chirp of his phone. He checks it, and the smile on his face fades. He immediately leaves the house, the cloths and apron left piled atop the counter.

*****

Matthew has his arms wrapped about himself and is shaking with stress. The detectives were very efficient, getting details about his car and sending out a recent photo of Esther, along with a brief description.

It's not reassuring Matthew though.

"They've sent out the Amber Alert," Will repeats, stroking down his friend's spine. "They'll find her, Matthew. She'll be okay."

"You don't know that," he says through chattering teeth. Breathing is hard.

They're at the station, and they've just had their statements taken. Will has given them the receipt from the pub and they have seen the photo of Mrs Brown - her last expression is one of mild surprise. There is no footage of the spot where she was shot, however, and there are too many vehicles moving in and out of the parking lot to immediately identify which one stole Esther.

Right now, Will is terrified for Matthew. He can't seem to stop his trembling, and his fingers are digging into his arms so hard, Will is certain Matthew will leave bruises.

Hannibal strides into the room in a sweep of dark gray overcoat and a concerned frown, escorted by Detective Merrick. Noticing how Matthew is curled up on himself, the psychiatrist hunkers down and physically wrenches Matthew's hands from his arms.

"Look at me, Matthew," Hannibal orders calmly.

Will swallows and sits slightly apart. Hannibal has shifted into his doctor mode, and has taken charge. Will is glad for that. He already too overwhelmed with emotion, both his own and his best friend's. Taking deep breaths of his own, Will closes his eyes and tilts his head back, trying to seek the quiet of his stream.

All he can see in his head is the stark terror in Matthew's eyes when they realize Esther has been taken, mirroring his own.

*****

"Look at me, Matthew," Hannibal says. From his peripheral vision, he notices Will shifting away, giving them more space. His boyfriend is trying to step away from the storm of fear and worry that Matthew is practically emanating. If Will had been less stable than he is now, he'll have been reflecting all of the negativity and amplifying Matthew's emotions until they

exploded out of control. As it is, Hannibal thinks his empathetic lover has been deliberately allowing Matthew to pour out his feelings.

The young man's brown eyes are open and in his direction, but there is nothing registering in them. Hannibal places both hands on the young man's cheeks and tightens his hold slightly. The pressure brings Matthew to the present.

"Stay with me, Matthew."

The nurse blinks, as though confused. "Where will I go?"

Hannibal rests his brow on Matthew's for a second, and then stands up. "Detective, if you're done with them, I'd like to send them home. You'll keep us apprised?"

"Of course," says Merrick.

"You can't send Matthew back home," Will says suddenly, tugging on Hannibal's cuff.

Hannibal nods. "I know. He's coming with us."

*****

Matthew can't feel anything. He's moving, but the view in front of him seems jerky and unfocused; his limbs feel cold, and there's a ringing in his ears that obscure everything that is said to him. He can sense the warm grip on his hand, and the reassuring presences that bracket him on either side, but for the life of him he can't figure out what exactly is going on.

He's vaguely aware of being ushered into a comfortable car, and of Will holding his hand throughout a silent ride. Then they lead him into their house and into a comfortable room, where they sit him down and take off his shoes. That's when he blinks and registers that he's not supposed to be here.

"What are you doing?" he murmurs.

Will looks up from unlacing his friend's left sneaker. "Helping you get ready to rest."

"No, no I can't, I have to help Esther pack her bag for tomorrow-"

"Matthew-"

"-and she hasn't brushed her teeth-"

"-Matthew, she's not-"

"-a-a-and she's, I have t-to go over her reading homework-"

"Mattie, please."

The nickname brings Matthew up short. He stares at Will, whose eyes are red-rimmed and his face blotchy. Will suddenly lunges forward and wraps his arms around his best friend.

"Mattie, she'll be found, she will be, but you mustn't- You must be okay when she comes home."

Matthew feels the world wobble, and hugs Will tightly, clutching onto the other young man's shirt. Will is warm and smells vague of wood and earth, good things, and he's a good friend, his best friend in the world. Will has protected him even before they became friends. Will is going to make everything alright.

"She'll b-be okay?" he whispers, feeling like the stupid little boy sent into the principal's office to meet someone to teach him to talk. "She will be, right?"

"Yes. She has to," Will murmurs, his voice almost cracking but there's a hint of steel beneath his tone.

They hold each other close. Matthew can practically feel Will's heart pounding against his own ribs, and he buries his face into Will's shoulder. He hears the door open, feels a hand laid on the top of his head, and just tries to breathe.

*****

"Eat something," Dr Lecter says, his voice unusually soft and warm. He sets a plate of some sausages and potatoes, along with a small serving of salad. Plain fare, by the doctor's standards.

They are all inside the kitchen. They're crowded around one of the gleaming counters,. None of them have much appetite.

Matthew takes a bite but tastes nothing. "I guess.. I guess I'll have to sort out Mom's funeral and everything."

"Don't worry about that yet," says Will, squeezing his friend on his forearm.

"Will's right. There will be time after Esther comes home." The psychiatrist pours some wine for himself. His jacket, waistcoat and tie have been removed; he looks undressed. Matthew thinks it feels almost *too* intimate and intrusive. This is usually Will's personal time with his boyfriend, how they unwind privately, and Matthew is here.

But he can't go home. His throat closes abruptly and his hand abruptly convulses, dropping the fork in his hand.

"If... if she was abducted, they'd have - they'd have made some sort of demand. They wouldn't have... they wouldn't have shot Mom," Matthew says, not quite understanding how he can form words. Will grabs his hand and grips it almost painfully, but Matthew seeks out Dr Lecter's gaze. "Sir, if she's-"

Dr Lecter comes around the counter and puts a hand to Matthew's cheek. His burgundy gaze is compassionate, and there is a strangely hollow glimmer behind the gaze. "We have to hope, Matthew. We have to."

*****

Matthew is too tense to sleep, but he needs the rest, so Hannibal gives him two sleeping pills and waits for the young man to sink into dreamless sleep. The doctor then tucks Matthew in and exits the guest room, turning out the lights, leaving only the bedside lamp on its dimmest setting.

Will hasn't settled down in their bedroom. He's showered, his curls sticking out erratically. On another night, Hannibal would have found that adorable. At the moment, he feels taut with worry, with a faint sense of foreboding souring the back of his mouth.

"Hannibal," Will says now that they have retreated to the sanctuary of their room, "I don't want to think about it, but Mattie's right. What if-"

"Hush. Don't." The doctor pulls Will in for a deep, soothing kiss, his hands smoothing down Will's curls. "Don't think about it."

"But-"

"We have to hope, Will, that's all we can do." Hannibal exhales, and for the first time that night allows his mask to slip. His breath catches. Esther, sweet and trusting and full of enthusiasm, so much like his late sister. Will presses their mouths together, trying to draw some courage.

"Matthew will *shatter* if Esther's gone," says Will.

Hannibal leans into the touch. "I was shattered too. So were you. We put each other back together; we can help Matthew do the same, should the need arise." He tugs Will into his lap as he sits down on the bed.

Will bites his upper lip, and then surrenders to Hannibal's gentle comfort. "What are we going to do?"

"We're going to help him. I will call Frederick later, apprise him of the situation." The doctor rubs his right hand over his eyes.

It hits them both then how close this is to Hannibal's heart.

Will hugs his lover tightly, pressing kisses everywhere he can reach, trying to explain without words his understanding and apology. Obviously it has slipped Will's mind earlier - nothing wrong with that, Matthew needed Will more - and now he curls close to the doctor, their breaths mingling.

"I don't think I can sleep," Will confesses, "or work tomorrow."

"Then stay home, stay with Matthew. He'll need your company anyway." Hannibal exhales and rests his brow against Will's curly head. "I have three appointments in the afternoon, and I promised Frederick I'll suggest him as a consultant to Jack."

Any other day, Will would be ribbing him about Chilton. Right now, they just stay wrapped together, each silently praying for a miracle.

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They don't get news outside of a call that they found the Honda, which was abandoned by the side of the freeway.

Matthew eats only when reminded, and bathes only when told to. It is as though someone has suspended him in between living and existing; he keeps his phone with him at all times, and stares at it whenever he is stationary, as though he can will it to ring.

Will frets. He can't do much more than that. He makes sure he stays close to Matthew throughout the first two days. After that, he has to return to work, so he asks Mr Curtis to let him work half-days; he wants to be with Matthew as much as possible.

There's something reassuring about skin contact, so Will spends a lot of time touching Matthew, holding his friend's hands or giving him impromptu hugs.

These demonstrations of affection and support haven't escaped Hannibal's notice, and by the third morning, Hannibal is also touching Matthew. Nothing like Will's embraces - a gentle pat on Matthew's head, a hand on his shoulder. Small touches to remind the nurse he is not alone.

*****

The Amber Alert has already informed Beverly and the team days ago, so Hannibal allows his concern to show when they meet up in the BAU to look over the Doll Maker's *modus operandi*.

"Whoever he or she is," says Price, "they signed their work. See this little 'V' at her ankle? I thought it was some sort of accidental cut, and then I noticed the second victim, Wesley Alden, has a V-incision on the back of his knee. The third victim, Gloria De Oro, has one at her elbow. Fourth and fifth have the signatures in the same place: under the left ear."

A hunch comes to Hannibal. "Did the fourth and fifth victims wear hearing aids?"

Price flicks through the report. "Not at the time they were killed. But their families told us that they did."

"The Vs are placed where they had physical problems. Weak ankles, perhaps, or a damaged ligament. Tennis elbow. Hearing disabilities." Hannibal frowns. "The killer must have had access to their medical records to know some of these things.

They and Jimmy Price and Brian Zeller are deep in discussion over the technique used to remove the eyes when they see Jack storming into with Miriam Lass hot on his heels, the blonde agent holding a sheet of paper.

Jack's face is particularly grim today. "We got the latest location faxed in, with a photo." He glances at Hannibal, a slight flicker of emotion behind his gaze.

Hannibal immediately knows.

*****

Hannibal has to excuse himself to collect his composure. Beverly joins him outside the room.

"So. Where do we go first?" she asks.

"Are you allowed to leave?" He has to swallow a few times to clear the lump from his throat.

She nods minutely. "I have to speak to the detectives in charge of the case. Better to do so personally, and grab whatever they have as well."

"We'll pick Will up from work then."

"Yeah. Let's do that."

*****

"Dr Jason Barres," says Mr Curtis, fishing through his stack of name cards for the relevant one. He hands it over to Will once he locates it. "He was here the other day - they've got a 1933 Model A Steinway that belonged to Gershwin, an absolute beauty - and he's in the department of music education. Send him an email when you can. Arrange for an afternoon's chat. He was impressed with your playing, he'll meet with you."

"Thanks, Mr Curtis," says Will. "I really appreciate it."

Mr Curtis smiles, his nut-brown face creasing with good humor. He pauses, and then asks, "How is your friend, the tall one? They find his sister yet?"

Before Will can say more, someone knocks on the door and interrupts. Danielle pokes her head in. "Will, you're needed. Your boyfriend and some Chinese lady's outside waiting for you."

Will's heart leaps. *They've found her!* He thanks Mr Curtis again, and hurries out to the main display room of the shop. Beverly and Hannibal are standing side by side, next to a Yamaha.

"Beverly, Hannibal. You-" He sees their faces, and his step falters.

Hannibal swallows and crosses the room quickly, just as Will crumples to the floor and covers his mouth, the action not able to stifle the keening in the young man's throat.

A few minutes pass before Hannibal says, "We must go back home. We need to... we need to tell Matthew."

"Oh God." Will shuts his eyes against the glaring reality of that task. "Hannibal-"

"-we will put him together again, I promise," the older man whispers against Will's cheek.

This time, Beverly drives, allowing Hannibal and Will the privacy of the back seat for Will to exhaust his tears on the long journey home. Once they reach home, there won't be time for Will's sorrow.

*****

Hannibal is surprised that Will lingers at the door, fearful and reluctant. "I don't- I don't want to be the one to tell him."

"You don't have to," says Beverly, and squeezes his shoulder. "I can do that."

Hannibal leads the way, Beverly trailing after him, and Will finally takes a deep breath and follows them. They find Matthew in the study, sitting at the piano but staring out the windows. When he hears them, he jolts to his feet, eyes wide and a hopeful light in his face.

Then he sees their expressions. His lips tremble, but he said nothing. His knees wobble, and he sits down slowly, his gaze falling to the carpet.

"No," he chokes out. "No, no, no no no no no..."

Will is the first to move, going to his best friend and tucking Matthew's head into his own chest. Perhaps it is that single act of compassion that breaks Matthew's control.

The anguished scream that rip free of Matthew's throat reminds Hannibal of his own, so long ago, and he has to bite back his own recollections. Will takes the brunt of Matthew's raw grief, lets his friend scream and scream himself hoarse, and then hugs him more tightly when he begins to weep.

It suddenly appears too private, too much; Beverly excuses herself, and Hannibal follows her out of the study, carefully shutting the door behind them.

"We'll get this monster," Beverly grits out. She swipes a few stray tears from the corners of her lovely eyes. "We'll get him, I promise."

Hannibal feels his scream from decades ago perched under his throat. He thinks that if he speaks, the same scream that tore out of Matthew will similarly explode from his own mouth. The same scream he had when they took *his* sister, the one that stayed stuck in his throat for years until he could give voice to the horror years later.

Instead of speaking, he embraces her lightly, and escorts her to the door. He does not return to the study; he retreats to the kitchen, and starts cooking.

This storm of grief will last yet. Now Will and Matthew have to bear the brunt of its first blow. It will strengthen the bond among all three of them, and Hannibal intends to water the roots with blood of the deserving.

He sharpens his knife, and thinks of hunger, of winters, and of milk teeth like pearls.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry. Really, really sorry.
hides under blankets

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The entire house feels like a mausoleum, and the men are like ghosts.

Matthew has long exhausted himself from grief; he's lying on the chaise longue, staring at the empty fireplace, and trying not to think. It helps that Will is sitting on the rug and leaning against the chaise longue. Matthew lets his meandering gaze fall on his best friend, study the dark brown curls loop by loop by loop. How some strands are darker against the rest. How soft Will's hair looks, and glossy. He reaches out without thought and his fingers comb through Will's curls, mesmerized by how they pop right back up.

Will leans into the caress, exhaling softly in a sound close to a purr. It is painfully domestic and wonderful, this quiet between them, and an unasked-for peek into a life that is not Matthew's to have.

Dr Lecter came in not too long ago. He gave them both mugs of hot chocolate and disappeared, and then they heard Winston and Buster barking joyfully. The doctor has taken them for a walk. Matthew almost resents that the dogs can't understand that the world has changed, that a light has gone from their lives forever, been taken forcefully from it.

He wonders if the dogs will miss her holding their leashes on their Saturday walks, and he forces himself to focus on the softness of Will's hair under his skin.

His phone buzzes again. It has been buzzing nonstop since an hour ago, when the news got out. The Amber Alert has made Esther part of the news cycle for the past few days, and now they have to report that it did not work, they did not get his baby sister in time. She's going to be the focus of the news for an evening, maybe two, along with all the other dead kids who had their turn.

Everyone wants to ask Matthew questions.

There have been other murdered kids, and their parents have been interviewed, so Matthew is supposed to be just like them. To cry in front of a camera, berate the police for not doing their jobs fast enough. Put on a show.

As though anyone cares that the world is a crueler place now.

Matthew turns off his phone and stuffs it under a cushion. He can barely breathe and they want him to think, to form words, to feel.

As if he can feel anything ever again.

No one has revealed that Matthew is staying with Will and Dr Lecter. That is good. At least they can't come pounding the door. Matthew doesn't know what he's likely to do should some

reporter shove a microphone in his face. He tucks both hands under the cushion he's using as a pillow, and thinks of static crackling in his ears.

Will glances over his shoulder, and then reaches up to stroke Matthew's cheeks. Matthew has noticed the increased frequency of touches since the ordeal started, and is grateful that Will doesn't try to use words to comfort. It's hypnotic, the gentle caress, and soothing in the same way a mild breeze is soothing on a scorching afternoon. His eyelids flutter shut.

He wants nothing more than to be able to sleep until he dies.

*****

Will draws his hand back. Matthew looks so empty and lifeless that, if he didn't know better, Will would have assumed he was a corpse. It's completely understandable.

If only he can do something to fill up the aching chasm inside Matthew, but he can't. He's not Esther, and he can't be more than a best friend. Throat seizing up with emotion, Will bites his lip and turns away. He's not ashamed of the tears that roll down his cheeks and drip from his chin, but he doesn't think Matthew wants to see more tears at the moment.

Suddenly his phone buzzes. It's Mikolaj. Will exits the study on silent feet and answers the call.

"Will?"

"Mikolaj, hey."

"Krissy just texted me about Esther. How's Matt doing? He didn't answer my call."

Will sniffed and cleared his throat. "He's, um. It's been really rough. He's with me and Hannibal, so he's not alone. I just... God, Miko, I don't know what to do. It's Esther. They took her and-" His voice breaks.

Mikolaj gives him a moment, and then says, *"Will it help for me to be there?"*

"Maybe," says Will. "I don't know. I don't- His mom and his sister. How am I supposed to make it better?"

"You can't. You can only make it easier." Mikolaj sounds too adult all of a sudden, and that thought makes Will smile weakly.*"I'll fly over tomorrow, take charge of the funerals and everything. You just keep him company and take care of him."*

He always forgets that Mikolaj does think of him as a younger brother; he should have told Mikolaj earlier. He says so, and on the other end of the line Mikolaj snorts. "*Your priority is Matthew. Don't worry about me, Will."* He hesitates, and adds, *"You take care too. Send my regards to Dr Lecter."*

*****

Hannibal doesn't usually walk the dogs alone, but he needs to clear his mind. He's received a few texts from Jack Crawford and Beverly, updating him on what has happened this far in the investigation. He will need to go in, see what is different about Esther that made the Doll Maker break his pattern.

Buster whines. He's more sensitive to Hannibal's moods. In some ways he's Hannibal's dog the way Winston is Will's, though Hannibal named Winston and Will named Buster. Hannibal stoops to scratch behind Buster's ears, and then rub Winston on his head. it settles them for the moment. The dogs aren't cognizant of much beyond the present, but they know routine, and Hannibal thinks they are in for a very difficult time this coming Saturday when they miss their walk with her.

He has to repress a shiver of rage and sorrow.

Not yet, not yet, he tells himself. He mustn't give in to it. Hot rage will blind him and lead to mistakes. He has to transmute it to cold fury; that will guide their revenge on the pig who has taken Esther from their lives.

Three decades of experience will aid him in the hunt, and this time, he is certain Will and Matthew will gladly participate.

*****

Hannibal returns to find Matthew asleep on the chaise longue, a gray throw covering him. There are faint tear trails, dried on his cheek, and Hannibal carefully wipes them away with the edge of his thumb.

The contact wakes the young man. He reaches up and clasps Hannibal's fingers, the first time he has ever voluntarily touched the doctor. "Please, sir, tell me it was a dream."

"I will not lie to you, even to make you feel better," says Hannibal, sitting down in the narrow space available on the furniture. His hand slides into Matthew's hair and then down, curling over his nape. "I will tell you that I will return to the investigation."

"And hand the killer to the FBI? After what they did?"

"Locating the killer requires resources I do not possess." Hannibal gently tightens his grip. "I promise you, justice will be served. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"Yes." Matthew closes his eyes, and leans into the older man's touch, trusting as a child.

*****

Will finds his boyfriend and best friend in an odd moment of intimacy. He stands at the door to the study, holding two mugs of chamomile tea. It brings a strange tightness to his chest.

His presence isn't unnoticed. Hannibal's eyes flick up and meets his, maroon on blue, and there is a barely-perceptible nod.

The young man walks in and places one of the mugs on a side table, keeping the second for himself, before he sits down on the rug, and leans against Hannibal's legs. The warmth of the tea seeps into his hands, and the scent of chamomile perfumes the air around them. Hannibal's other hand comes to rest on Will's shoulder and squeezes gently.

Will lets his eyes close as he sips the tea. In this moment, centered within the storm of grief, there is serenity.

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Matthew returns to work the next day, wan and withdrawn. The other nurses and orderlies leave him be, other than to murmur encouragement and support in passing. Dr Freyman is watchful as Matthew keys in her notes. When there is a lull between inmates, she says, "You really shouldn't be in the therapy sessions with Gideon. You're only going to fuel his obsession."

"I'll keep that in mind, doctor," says Matthew quietly.

"I can speak to Dr Chilton if you wish."

"He's offered me the out," Matthew tells her with a small smile. "But I-I'm useful, being there. Getting information from him."

"You're worth more than the ramblings of a madman, Matthew Brown." Dr Freyman rests a wrinkled and sturdy hand on the young man's shoulder. It's grandmotherly and strong, and Matthew wishes he has the words to express his gratitude.

Barney comes in with the next patient, and when they are done with Gregory Dunn, the orderly tells Matthew that Dr Chilton wants to speak with him.

It is with no small amount of trepidation that Matthew holds when he goes to Dr Chilton's ostentatious office. He wonders what the administrator wants from him, or if he is to be transferred to another hospital, if Gideon has started using Matthew as leverage for cooperation.

"Come in," Dr Chilton says loudly when the young man knocks. The man is practically sprawled in his chair. He glances up at Matthew as the nurse comes in. "Have a seat."

"You asked for me, Dr Chilton?"

"I need you to be there today when I administer tests to Abel Gideon."

Matthew feels his blood freeze in his veins. "Excuse me?"

"He has become unresponsive in the week you have been absent. Since you are back at work, I intend to make the most of it. He'll take the tests I give him, and you will sit right before him. I will, of course, be there in the room, along with the orderlies."

"No, I-I-I don't- He's unhealthily obsessed. I-I-I-I-I-" Matthew has to fight to keep breathing normally. "I can't, Dr Chilton, not to-today."

Chilton tilts his head and studies Matthew silently. There is a reptilian sense of satisfaction that is curling out of the psychiatrist. "We have a session in half an hour. All you need to do is give him the tests."

"He's-he's taken all the tests before-"

"I have never seen him display this level of obsession. The tests are an excuse for me to observe him at a state closest to the time he suffered a psychotic break. This time, we get to see it in a very controlled environment." The administrator leans forward and laces his fingers together. "You don't have to engage him in conversation or in eye contact. All you have to do, is be present."

Matthew feels sick. He shakes his head, his jaw clamped shut with tension. "Not-not today, not now, no, n-not now."

"I understand you have just suffered a devastating loss-"

"No! No, no, n-no. No I can't, I can't I-I c-c-can't. I can't." Matthew covers his mouth, his face. To his shame and anger, his cheeks and turning red and the back of his eyes sting with tears. To face Abel Gideon now when he's still trying to build up his walls will be emotional suicide. He *knows* he's exposed, raw and skinned and ready to be picked apart. Forcing his breathing to slow, he peers up. "Please, Dr Chilton. Not today."

The psychiatrist studies him like a snake. "Today. You will be there in twenty minutes, or you will leave."

*****

Hannibal is at the morgue with Price and Zeller. Neither agent is cracking wise today. Hannibal appreciates their respect.

The psychiatrist studies Esther. "He shaved her but didn't take her eyes."

"Yes. Unlike the others, she fought back," says Zeller. "There's bruising here, on the wrists, and around the ankles. I think she was bound after she was abducted."

"What were the results of her toxicology report?"

"More eszopiclone, but this time there's also presence of zolpidem. Pills were ground up in water, and she drank it." Price sighs. "My nephew is about their age. I can't even begin to imagine how I'd feel if it had been him."

Hannibal only inclines his head to acknowledge that he has heard the man. He leans over the girl and tenderly brushes a tendril of the rich blonde hair from her cheek. The blonde wig makes her look too worldly, and cheapens her. The make-up has thankfully been washed from her skin - Hannibal has seen the photos, and hated seeing an Esther who isn't her. Already he has placed a rush order to a wig company in Nevada to make something close to

Esther's original hairstyle. The killer put Esther in a white, lacy dress, delicate and flowery, something Esther would never have worn since she was an active child. The dress, along with the other victims' clothes, now hang in a chamber to be fumed for prints.

"Why Esther Brown? She wasn't a latch-key child, she was with her mother." Zeller frowns, looking from one body to the other. "This isn't in the pattern."

"No, it isn't in the obvious pattern. But there is something we are missing." Hannibal straightens up. "I will need the interviews with all the parents. There is something outside of their phys-"

He is interrupted by his phone. He glances at it and is surprised that it's Matthew.

"Hello Matthew. How can I help?"

"Hi Dr L-ecter, I-I-I, um. I'm s-s-s-s-sorry, I just, I need, I-I uh, I don't know, I d-don't know what I'm supposed t-t-t-to, to do."

The return of the stammer is disturbing. Hannibal walks aside and asks, "Take a deep breath, Matthew. Now, what do you need to tell me?"

As the young man informs him of Chilton's ultimatum, Hannibal's ire rises. It's obvious that Chilton intends to use Matthew's current unstable emotional state to chum the waters of Gideon's mind. It is a petty, selfish revenge, and if it were some other person whom Chilton is using, Hannibal would have just watched the inept psychiatrist deal his heavy-handed damage on Abel Gideon.

However, this is Matthew. Matthew is Will's best friend, and, by proxy, Matthew belongs to Hannibal's own. He schools his thoughts and narrows his eyes. He'll let Chilton play his game - because Chilton will definitely pay the price.

*****

Do not walk out of the hospital. You are needed there.

There will be time for a reckoning, Matthew. Not today.

Do you trust me?

The nurse sits there at the steel table and stares at the blank surface, categorizing every nick and scratch and patch of light. Heat claws at his lungs and ice crawls beneath his skin; he feels divided, scattered, shattered into a million fragments.

Dr Lecter's voice runs like silk over his nerves. The accent and tone calms him. He pictures Will standing behind him, blue eyes blazing in righteous fury at Chilton's smug face and Gideon's indecent satisfaction, and feels assured.

"Heard about the deaths in the family," says Gideon. There is a dark relish in his tone as he leers at Matthew. "So very sorry for your loss. I know how it is to lose my family."

Matthew wants to claw the sound from his throat. He imagines using a penknife to slice the throat open and extract the vocal cords.

"Of course, I killed them myself."

"Abel, you're supposed to focus on the test," chides Chilton insincerely. The sound of his fountain pen over paper makes it clear that he's taking down data - no one in the room is fooled by the whole charade of taking tests.

"Sorry, doctor. It's just that Mr Brown reminds me so much of my late wife. It's the... *vulnerability.* And that neck. She had the same elegant column that begged to be marked." Gideon's pencil scratches the paper with purpose. "I marked it, too. Often and well, and eventually, permanently. alas, it'll have rotted away by now."

Matthew thinks of blood winding crimson trails down limbs and torsos; of driving breath out of lungs; stringing up bits and pieces from each of the therapy cages.

"The light goes out of their eyes as they take their last breaths. It's breathtakingly beautiful, pardon the pun. I always like to imagine what they are thinking of at that moment. What do you think Esther was thinking of?"

Matthew's gaze flick up, and for just that split second, time and space is suspended. He imagines reaching into Gideon's chest and ripping out his heart, tearing it into bits with his bare hands, and shoving them into the leering man's mouth. A growl rumbles from Matthew's throat.

Gideon's smirk only widens. "You've got it *in* you, kiddo."

"That's enough, Abel," Chilton says sharply. "O'Malley, take him back downstairs."

*****

Barney hands a mug of hot coffee to Matthew. "It's okay now, kid. We all know who's the problem."

"Yeah, Brown," says Nash sympathetically. "Gideon's a fucking creep. I swear, if I can get away with it, I'll break his neck."

Matthew is still as a statue, sitting in one of the chairs in the staff break room. The coffee is scalding hot, brewed to tar thickness in the way Barney likes it, yet it does nothing for Matthew. The young man can feel his fingertips crackling with an urge to tear and ruin.

At the moment, Dr Freyman is in Dr Chilton's office, the older woman berating the chief of staff once she heard what happened in the therapy room. The nurse is grateful for the older woman's support - she is about the only member of staff who can yell at Chilton, and since she is widely adored by the staff and even has the respect of most of the patients for her solid, steadfast care, Chilton dares not fire her. Besides, it isn't as though her position is widely coveted. Locating a doctor willing to treat insane patients is an uphill task.

"Hey, you wanna head home early?" Nash asks.

Matthew shakes his head. "I'm alright. I'll be okay."

"Yeah, right," says Barney. "You look like a ghost, Matt. Stay here, log in data. We'll cover your other duties."

The young man can only nod his thanks.

*****

"I'm gonna *kill* him," Will fumes aloud as he unclips the dogs leashes. "I am going to skewer him to a chair and feed him his *brain."*

"You almost sound angry on his behalf," says Dr Lecter dryly. He hands each of the young men a glass of lemon water, and proceeds to fill the water bowls for the dogs. Buster yaps for a treat and the doctor gives him one. "However, Frederick Chilton's death at this moment in time serves no purpose."

Matthew pulls off the borrowed gloves and stuffs them in his pocket. Practically everything he's wearing is borrowed; he hasn't gone home to collect anything. He will have to return home soon. It is a challenge he fears.

"Maybe I should change jobs," he says. "Switch to a different hospital. But my probationary period isn't up and... and the thing is, Chilton isn't asking me to *do* anything, just sit there."

"He knew exactly what it would lead to. It wasn't your fault," Will says, taking his hands. "Chilton and Gideon were the assholes."

It's strange that Dr Lecter allows such intimacy between Will and Matthew, but since that afternoon in the study, there has been a cocoon around them. Dr Lecter only ruffles their hair before going back inside to check on the meat in the oven, leaving Will and Matthew alone on the porch, their hands still linked.

Matthew drinks in the comfort like a parched man at a desert oasis. The warmth of Will's hands is reminiscent of a pair of smaller, smoother ones, and Matthew grasps them tightly.

"I'm scared," says Matthew, "of losing control. That I'll look at him and kill him. I could see it so clearly."

"You won't."

"You don't know that."

"I do," Will insists. "You're my best friend. I know you. I know what you are capable of."

Matthew lowers his face and rests it against their joined hands. Winston whines and comes closer, nudging his cold nose at Matthew's cheek. The young man leans against the dog's head, but does not let go of Will.

"I feel wrong, like I d-on't belong in my skin," he admits in a low voice. "Something is clawing from beneath it, struggling to break free, and I don't know what I'll become."

To his surprise, Will nuzzles closer, practically snuggling up to his side. He is warm and fits against Matthew like they belong together. "Then maybe it's time to find out."

Matthew then recalls the conversation after the Tier incident, the whole mess that had been Julie Benson. The part where Will wanted him to be a murderer - that Will still wants him to be a murderer.

Only this time, there's no reason for Matthew to keep his hands clean.

The reason for Matthew to be a good man is gone,

He turns, and feels his breath mingle with Will's. Half an inch closer, and their lips will touch. Yet there is nothing sensual about the moment. His best friend's gaze is fixed on him, blazing and clear. Matthew thinks that his own eyes reflect the same dark desire.

It is beautiful, Matthew thinks, and his lips curve very slightly. The motion is echoed in Will's face.

"You're right," he whispers. Their hands tighten on each other's, and they rest their brows together. If Matthew feels Dr Lecter watching from inside the house, there is no prickle of fear.

Both stand on the edge of an abyss, and Matthew is ready for the fall.

*****

Mikolaj and his girlfriend, a petite brunette named Selina, drop by Will's home that evening, and join them for dinner at the table.

"This is delicious, Dr Lecter, I've not had pheasant for such a long time," says Selina in her oddly husky voice.

"Thank you." The psychiatrist smiles at her courtesy. "Pheasant Normandy is one of my favorite ways of preparing pheasant. I consider it comfort food."

Mikolaj sips at the pinot noir that Dr Lecter has selected for the meal. "It does have a sense of homeliness."

On the other side of the table, Matthew and Will do not join in the conversation. Matthew knows that it is obvious to everyone that he is trying to complete the meal instead of taste it. No one draws attention to the lack of contribution, however.

Hannibal keeps the conversation light, asking about Selina's job as a transportation engineer, and how she and Mikolaj met.

"At a benefit, actually," she says, and launches into an anecdote about Mikolaj's poor attempt at flirtation when they were at a fundraiser in Barbados.

Dinner passes in a flurry of one-sided conversation, and afterwards, Selina meets the dogs with Will in the back yard, leaving Mikolaj and Matthew to have some time alone in the

living room.

"Thanks for coming back," says Matthew.

"You should have told me," says Mikolaj. "I had to find out through Krissy."

"Sorry."

"I know we're not as close as you and Will, but I am your friend." Mikolaj pats Matthew's knee. "I'm here for you, anytime."

Matthew offers a weak smile. "How long can you stay in Baltimore this time round?"

"As long as you need. Aunty's away in California with her latest conquest, so I have the run of the house. If you don't want to stay here with Will and Dr Lecter, you can come to mine."

"I'm probably heading back to my place soon. I'll need to, um." Matthew's breath catches. "I'll need to pack. Everything. Keep some, sell some, throw some. I don't know."

Mikolaj's voice is uncharacteristically tender. "Do you intend to sell the house?"

"Can't afford the mortgage myself," Matthew admits honestly. "Besides, it'll be too painful living around all the... all the reminders."

"I can help."

"You have your work commitments, Miko, I can't ask that of you."

"No," says Mikolaj somberly, "you can. Will and I and Selina can help you pack. You don't have to wade through all this alone. If you don't want Selina there, we'll get it. But you are not alone in this."

Matthew is robbed of speech by a thick lump in his throat. He sniffs and nods. "Thanks, man."

"You're welcome."

Will comes in with Selina. The young woman senses that this is a moment for the friends, and excuses herself to the bathroom.

"She's pretty nice," says Will. "Buster and Winston like her."

"Glad she has your approval," says Mikolaj with a lazy smile.

"His gets your okay, but mine didn't?" Matthew snorts. To Mikolaj, he complains, "He drove away my last girlfriend."

"She was a lying, two-timing whore. You can do better than that."

"I think I've missed a lot, not being here," Mikolaj says.

Will shakes his head. "Nah. Just... stuff."

"I'm going back home tomorrow," Matthew finds himself saying. "I'm gonna have to... start. At least... at least pick up some things, not keep wearing Will's stuff."

His two friends nod, almost in unison. It's adorable, if Matthew felt like laughing, which he doesn't.

"We'll meet you there," says Will.

"I'll need to bring some things for Esther though," Matthew says, wringing his hands. "I don't know if I c-can stay in the house over night."

Mikolaj elbows him. "You are talking to the two persons in the world who are more than happy to put you up."

The nurse allows a brief smile, and nods. "Yeah."

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The next day, Chilton leaves him alone at the hospital, and Dr Freyman enlists Matthew to update patient records and transcripts of therapy sessions. Dull, solitary work, for which Matthew is grateful. He needs to get his bearings again, he knows, but as long as Esther's murderer walks free, he can't seem to move on.

After work, Matthew goes home, except it doesn't feel like a home anymore.

To his immense gratitude, Mikolaj and Will are waiting by the front door. Will seems slightly teary-eyed when Matthew comes up and unlocks it, and the trio walk into a house of silence and painful memories.

There is a smell of spoiled food. The dinner his mother was preparing that night is still on the table, and so there are autumn flies buzzing about the kitchen. Will throws open a window to let fresher air in, throws out the spoiled food, and starts rinsing everything off. Matthew debates telling him to stop - that it was Esther's last meal - and then stops when he thinks better of it.

Mikolaj pats his arm. "You wanna grab whatever you need?"

"I-" Matthew finds himself unable to breathe when he sees Esther's school bag lying on the sofa, along with her homework stacked neatly on the coffee table, pencil case atop the small pile. Reading homework, maths, science, in that order. He sinks to his knees and hugs himself, rocking faintly, hoping to drive away that drowning sense of hopelessness.

He's surprised when he feels Mikolaj's arm over his shoulders, and Will hugging him again, murmuring that they don't have to do this immediately.

"I-I need to- I need to get stuff. For Esther. F-for her," he manages to choke out.

"I can get it. You don't have to force this," says Will.

"No, I have to." Matthew struggles to his feet, hauled up by both Mikolaj and Will, and takes a few deep breaths. He does not let go of their hands until his heart is no longer racing.

He packs his own things first, grabbing from his closet a few changes of clothes and his laptop. He even remembers the notes he promised Will. Then he braces himself before he walks out into the hallway.

He goes to his sister's bedroom, and freezes.

The bedspread with its Van Gogh *Starry Nights* print, the constellation charts on the walls, the model of the solar system suspended from the ceiling. Books stacked alphabetically on the bookshelves, with one well-loved volume on her desk, still open to the page she was reading. Dolls and stuffed toys at the foot of her bed, arranged precisely by name.

His fingers clench on the door jamb so hard he thinks it should splinter.

Slowly, every step a tortuous reminder of an absence, Matthew goes in, and picks up the book. He notes the page she stopped, and then goes to the bed to take the one toy Esther inherited from Matthew.

"Let's go," he says, feeling numb.

Mikolaj places an arm over Matthew's shoulders. "If you don't mind, I'll hire a cleaning service to clean up the house for you first, and get you packing boxes."

"That'd be... that'd be good," says Matthew, his voice rough around the edges. "Only not that room. Nothing in there is to be touched by anyone else."

They all understand which room Matthew is referring to, and Mikolaj promises to oversee the whole thing.

*****

Hannibal is waiting at the main entrance of Quantico when the three young men arrive.

Matthew gets out of the vehicle. "Thanks, Dr Lecter. I wouldn't ask but... But, um. Yeah."

"I know." Hannibal takes from Matthew the pale gray teddy bear, faded and patched from years of active cuddling, and the book, *Turn Left at Orion*. The doctor's heart lurches when he recognizes it: he had given Esther the book for her birthday last year, for her to look for objects in space other than stars. The spine of the book is creased and the pages are marked with post-its.

"She was on page 120," Matthew informs him seriously, "and Theodore Bumble always sleeps on the right of her pillow."

"Noted." Hannibal tugs the young man close for a brief hug, and murmurs, "I'm proud of you, for doing this."

Matthew shuts his eyes tightly, feeling his throat close up. He swallows a few times, and then nods. "Thank you, sir."

*****

"What *is* he carrying?" Lass asks Price when they see Dr Lecter stride into the morgue, Beverly Katz beside him.

"That," says Jimmy Price, "is a book and teddy bear."

"Those do not belong in a morgue," she says acerbically, and makes as though she's about to go over to speak to them.

Price grabs her arm and yanks her aside. His usually kind and amiable demeanor hardens. "Don't you dare," he warns. "Don't even think about it."

The two watch, subsequently joined by Zeller, as Beverly pulls out the slab currently holding Esther Brown.

*****

Esther's lovely brown hair has been shaved off and replaced with a blond wig, which has been removed to check for trace evidence, so Hannibal is looking at a bald pate with a V incised into the scalp. The psychiatrist has placed an order for another wig, something close to Esther's original hair color; he doesn't think Matthew will want to see his sister like this.

Mental disability, Hannibal supposes. At least the killer didn't take her eyes.

Not that this small mercy will spare the killer's.

The doctor places the teddy bear on the right side of her head with great reverence, and then turns the book to page 120, and puts the open book on her chest.

"What's the bear's name?" asks Beverly quietly.

"Theodore Bumble," says Hannibal with a small, pained smile, and swallows. "He's to stay on the right side of her pillow."

The agent nods. "Got it. Theodore Bumble, right side." There will be times they shift the bodies about, but Hannibal is certain that Beverly will make sure that the stuffed animal will be put where it belongs.

Beverly slides Esther back into the drawer carefully, so as not to dislodge the items. Once the door is shut, she is all business. "I've traced the wig makers. He or she is getting them from all over, sent to different addresses. All the addressees are invalids, many suffering from dementia. They can't possibly be the killer."

"The various welfare services that attend to them then," says Hannibal. "There has to be an overlap there."

"Got it," she says, and then hands over another folder. "Interview transcripts with the parents. Jack is tracing the kids' medical and school records."

Hannibal flicks through each transcript, skipping over the parents' self-blame to locate their descriptions of the children. One word keeps leaping out at him.

"He is going to hit a dead end," says the psychiatrist. "I've found the common link among the victims."

*****

"Kindness?"

"Yes," says Hannibal quietly. "He or she preys on the kind. All the children were noted for being responsible, polite, helpful kids."

Jack leans back on his desk. "The killer uses the excuse of going to the patients' homes and abducts the kids. Because the patients have dementia, they don't recall whether they have ever signed for the wigs, nor can they recall if the killer took the kids right in front of them."

"Or they remember only fragments, or they have not been interviewed," says Beverly. She folds her arms. "I also have the list of services that attended to each of these addressees."

"Hand that to Miriam to compile the overlaps," says Jack, "then you and I will interview those addressees. Dr Lecter, thank you. At least now we can issue a warning."

*****

*****

The warnings come too late. The next two bodies are found in Delaware, and Jack is driving the team ever harder to find the killer. With the body count at eight children, the FBI is ramping up its investigation.

This bothered Hannibal. He needs the FBI, and they are narrowing down the field of suspects. However, their presence limits his active participation.

Miriam Lass barges into Jack's office where Hannibal has parked himself to examine the latest interview transcripts and crime scene photos. "I've got a list of- Hey. Hi, Dr Lecter. Where's Jack?"

"He's waiting on the forensic analysis downstairs," says the psychiatrist. "You can leave that here. He'll be back soon."

Lass hesitates, but puts the folder down. "Could you tell him I've got the healthcare information on the addressees? I'm gonna grab some coffee and work on tracing the complete routes of the respective services."

"Of course," says Hannibal.

Once the agent is gone and the coast is clear, Hannibal pulls over the the folder, flips it open, and scans down the list, keeping an eye out for anyone who may be walking past Jack's office. There are only four healthcare providers that cross state lines that attended to all of the addressees. Hannibal skims over the list, focusing on the list of employees.

Only five work alone, delivering medications to their patients and taking the patients out to various medical appointments.

None of them are women.

Reassessing his previous assumption, Hannibal then glances at the employee information that Lass has compiled. Four are married, three have children.

Only one is a bachelor.

"Jordan Greene." Filching the document will be risky, so he contents himself with memorizing contact information. Hannibal closes the file and wonders how he is going to track down a suspect that is always on the move. He quickly slides the folder back where Lass placed it. Just in time: the door opens to admit Jack and Chilton.

"Good afternoon." Hannibal is barely cordial to the other psychiatrist. "You seem to be enjoying your new role as consultant, Frederick."

"What can I say? I love to help," says Chilton greasily. "Your young friend seemed quite distressed the other day. How is he now?"

"Much better, thanks to Will."

"You are a better man than I am, to trust the two young men to spend so much time alone together. I'm sure Will Graham is doing all he can to comfort poor Matthew."

The hidden implication isn't lost on Hannibal, but he merely smiles. Shallow of Chilton to think that Matthew and Will can ever betray him, but then again, Chilton is only human. He takes the folder on Jack's desk and passes it to the man. "I trust them both. However, I do have to leave, as I have an appointment in another hour. Ms Lass said that the folder contains information on healthcare providers for the addressees."

Jack nodes and opens the folder. "Thanks, Dr Lecter. Dr Chilton, shall we?"

*****

Jordan Greene isn't on Facebook or other social networking sites; the only information Will can dig up on him is on the home nursing organization where the man works, and even that is very brief. At least there is a photo to go with it: a pleasant-looking man with wheat-brown hair and watery, wide gray eyes. The man lives in Virginia, but Will knows that someone with such audacity to steal away these children and taunt the police with their bodies isn't going to leave evidence in his home.

He clears his search history and goes downstairs in search of Hannibal, who is perusing the latest issue of a journal on criminal psychology.

"I don't know how to track him," Will admits, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

Hannibal glances up from the page. "Would you rather the FBI do it?"

"Will they have enough to keep him?" Will asks.

The older man makes a small moue of doubt. "He's thorough with the presentation. He'll likely be thorough with the clean-up too."

"So we let the FBI get him, and then we get him after?" Will frowns, not liking the sound of that. "Like Ingram?"

"It's not as though we can lure him to us," says Hannibal. "If Chilton can't even identify this man as the odd one out, then he is more abysmal at his job than I had been led to believe."

Will sighs and leans into his boyfriend. "I want this over, Hannibal. I need this over. All of us do."

"It will be." Hannibal puts away his reading and kisses Will. The young man relaxes and nuzzles under Hannibal's jaw. The doctor kisses him again. "Let's walk the dogs. I'd like to have you to myself for a while before dinner."

Chapter End Notes

I'm still sorry about the previous chapter.
Esther was written in for Hannibal to bond with in Bread and Music, and then I fell in love with her, and then I realized as I started this fic that she had to die for the rest of the story to work. I adore her, and thank you all for loving an OC so much.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

graphic description of a death tableau.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Here, watch your fingers-"

"Why don't I help him, kiddo?" Will smiles at the girl. "Much easier for me than for you."

The girl shrugs. "Sure. Thanks, man."

"You're welcome," Will says, tipping his baseball cap. Once she is out of sight, he then turns to the other guy and takes hold of the wheelchair. He keeps his gloves on. "So how do you want this done?"

If he hasn't been watching for it, Will would have missed the tightness in the other guy's jaw and the flash of irritation in his eyes. "Just load it into the van."

"Sure." Certain that they are nowhere near the security cameras, Will grabs the wheelchair by the handles, then abruptly turns and rams it into the guy's knees. Before he can right himself, Will jabs him between his shoulder blades with a taser. "Hello Mr Greene. We are going to have a conversation."

*****

"You're cutting it a bit close, mongoose," Hannibal says when Will stops at the office.

Will leans against the door frame. "He almost had another one. And his company van is his kill truck for sure. I left it on the scene with his iPhone. Lucky for us, Matthew knows how to track someone through their phone numbers."

"And where is Mr Greene now?"

"Waiting to be served," says Will with the barest hint of a smile. "I'm going home for a shower. Matthew'll be home in an hour or so. When will you be done?"

"Not so soon, I'm afraid." Hannibal turns his head partly when his phone rings. "Perhaps much later than expected."

Will kisses him on the cheek and murmurs, "We'll wait."

*****

"We found his company van. Tons of evidence in here, but no Jordan Greene," says Beverly.

"Who's Jordan Greene?" Hannibal asks.

Beverly hands him a photograph on top of a manila folder. "Deliveryman that fits the profile. He delivers supplies to the addressees and their home care nurses. Couldn't get him at home, so we tracked his GPS signal. Then we had to wait on a warrant. Seems like we're too late. Again."

Hannibal, already gloved, peers into the vehicle where Zeller is collecting evidence. "This appears to be where he kills."

"Mobile, compact, and suited to his needs. He's neat, too," says Zeller. "Quite clean. But there are bottles of water that I'm betting have been tampered with. There's a powdery residue around the lid."

Beverly makes a sound of frustration. "Thing is, he's disappeared. We found a small folder under the passenger seat, full of news clippings about his victims, and pictures before they were sent to the police."

"Trophies?" He takes the folder from the tech processing the van, and flips through them. "Narcissism will be the downfall of serial killers."

Each child was posed in their wigs and make-up, and words were scribbled on the back of the pictures.

"*For children are innocent and love justice, while most of us are wicked and naturally prefer mercy*," Hannibal recites aloud.

Zeller perks up. "GK Chesterton."

"He's condemning us through the dead children," Hannibal remarks. "Or condemning those who make children grow up too fast."

"Great. A serial killer with a vision. Why is this happening? First that fucking Clark Ingram got away, and now this one?" Beverly steps away furiously and kicks the tires of her own car. "Damn it, Hannibal, this isn't supposed to happen! We're the FBI, we are - we're meant to catch the bad guys. Instead I spend my days at work worrying that my fiancee is going to get abducted again and... This is a child killer. And we don't have him. We don't need another one that got away - the Chesapeake Ripper was enough."

"He could have got a warning," says Hannibal. "We wouldn't know for sure. At least with the evidence in this vehicle, you can put out a notice for his arrest."

"It's out as we speak," says Jack, coming over. "Jordan Greene was the only one we could not get yesterday. He must have been spooked."

Hannibal inclines his head. "Perhaps he heard something through the company? You asked for his files yesterday, didn't you?"

"And they refused to give them to me, and now this killer is gone," Beverly snarls. "Can't we slap them with something about obstructing justice?"

Jack shakes his head and sighs heavily. "You can't charge people after the fact, Beverly. We didn't have probable cause yesterday. Now we have the evidence we need. Let's focus on catching him."

Her fury and frustration are beautiful things, Hannibal thinks privately, beautiful in their rarity, and excuses himself to return home.

*****

*****

Jordan wakes up to the young man who knocked him out earlier. His head is pounding, like his brain is trying to escape from the bone enclosure of his skull. In front of him is a table and a lamp shining right into his face. It feels hot.

"Hi," says the young man. "Mr Greene, right?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm your judge," says the young man. Carefully, he adjusts the lamp so it isn't glaring right into Jordan Green's eyes. The young man has dark hair, curling fetchingly around his face, framing his pale skin like he was a painting. With a gloved hand, he slides a pad of legal paper and a pen across the table. "I want you to write down full confessions to everything you did to those poor children, and sign these confessions."

His arms and legs are free. Jordan squints. "Now why would I do that?"

Then he hears a telltale click, and then a pressure of a hard metal barrel against his scalp. There's someone behind him, whose breathing is even and calm - and that is all the noise he hears from the person behind him. That unnerves Jordan more than the gun.

"You can't kill me in time to disarm him, and I also have a gun," says the young man. He may as well have been discussing the weather.

"You-you have no proof that I did anything."

The young man snorts. "No proof? You have photos of your victims in your car. The bottles of water have been laced with sleeping drugs - there's a powdery residue on the treads, just so you know. Don't waste our time with pointless evasions, Jordan. I know what you are."

"Yeah?"

"You're a goddamn coward," the young man says, still placid, but there is threat lacing the atmosphere. "You targeted *children.* Do you really think no one would find you?"

"I-I, no, I didn't target them, I saved them *from* the world. The world doesn't deserve them," says Jordan.

The young man stands and circles the table to lean against the edge next to Jordan. "Explain."

"They were good, too good. The world would have ruined them. I showed people what they would have become if they had continued to live. Forgotten, and, and discarded. Unworthy, impure. I gave them permanence-"

"Hold on," the young man says to the person behind Jordan. "You promised. Calm down."

The mouth of the gun barrel presses into Jordan's scalp. "He took her for his crazed *vision*-"

"Calm down." The young man is stern and commanding. The pressure to Jordan's scalp lessens. "You know what? Write. Unburden your soul. If you talk any more, he'll shoot you in the neck, and I can tell you that it is a very painful way to die."

"And-and what then?"

"He'll stop pointing the gun at you." The young man's smiling face is angelic and terrifying in its openness.

*****

Coming in late, Hannibal watches it all from the doorway. Will sits in front of Jordan Greene. Matthew remains behind the killer with a gun pointed at the man's head, and don't they look wonderful together, lit and shadowed to frame the sweating and nervous man between then?

With his back to the door and to the other two men, Jordan Greene is scribbling away. There is a stench of urine and fear - obvious where it stems from.

It takes Jordan Greene nearly an hour to write everything. Matthew only shifts once, from his left hand to his right, all with a serenity that is beguiling and beautiful in its hollowness.

The materials are next to Hannibal. He runs his gloved hands over them, and then looks at Will and Matthew. His lover will become something terrible and inspiring, Hannibal thinks, and with Matthew by his side, they will be unstoppable. If Will is Hannibal's witness and helper now, Matthew will become Will's in the near future, and why is that thought souring the back of Hannibal's tongue?

Hannibal licks over his lower lip, suddenly desirous of a glass of Aglianico. What is Will Graham going to become?

*****

Matthew has no idea how Will can remain this calm. His entire being is vibrating with the need to kill Jordan Greene, this man who took his baby sister away for some paltry vision. Yet he is keeping still, finger not on the trigger, gun pressed to that waste's head. Every now and again Will glances up and meets's Matthew's eyes. There is always a silent reassurance there, and Matthew waits, and trusts, and imagines the pleasure he will have in a short moment's time when he gets to exact revenge on Jordan Greene.

*****

Will's gaze scans over the words. There are numerous spelling and grammatical errors, as he expected, but Jordan Greene has been as honest as he knows how. He carefully retrieves the pen, folds the papers, and sets them aside. His faint smile disappears, and he leans forward to invade Jordan Greene's personal space.

"I read these, and I see a waste of a human being," Will hisses. "You think of yourself as a visionary, but you are nothing but a resentful coward and bully. You killed them to rebuke the world? You killed them because they were better than you. You pathetic, jealous, resentful *child*. You took their lives because, despite their disabilities, they were good kids, good people. They would have shone like stars, *and you ended their lives because you couldn't stand imagining that.*"

Jordan Greene swallows convulsively. "No, I-I have a message-"

Relentless and vicious now, Will went on. "You didn't want to *preserve* them. You *hated* them. Your parents didn't love you for your disability, did they? Watched you like hawks, because you were *wrong*. And these kids, they all had disabilities and they had freedom. And they were trusted by their parents. Did you smile to yourself in glee when you saw their parents weeping on TV? Did you think you've won?"

"I didn't - They lost their kids, they left their kids to fend for themselves-"

"Shut up." Will rises slowly to his feet and snarls, "You thought you were making a statement to the world? Your kills are not *art.* You took what was beautiful and removed their light, and I will not forgive you for this. *We* will not forgive you for this."

"Please, please, I'll stop, I'll turn myself in-"

"I said, shut up." Will grabs the pen and slams it point down next to Jordan Greene's hand, missing by less than an inch. The man yelps and covers his mouth. He is practically reeking with fear.

"You wanted to make a statement." Will sits down again. "I am going to help you."

*****

*****

Beverly can tell that Jack Crawford is not a happy man. She's not a happy camper either.

The GPS on Jordan Greene's phone finally pinged again after two days of silence and a manhunt. People are baying for blood now that there is a suspect, and the FBI has had to field dozens of calls with false leads.

Now they are in a tiny, run-down cabin, and the phone hanging from a wreath made with paper on the door. The stink of death is obvious to anyone with a sense of smell.

"The paper that forms the wreath appears to have writing on it," says Lass. She takes a few photographs of it from different angles, and then bags the whole thing.

Beverly pushes open the door carefully and slowly, just in case there is a tripwire.

The door swings open to reveal the exhibit within.

Lass gasps. "Oh my god."

Beverly feels her iron-clad stomach turn. "Someone really wanted to punish him."

"We have the Dollmaker, but now we have to hunt the killer of the Dollmaker?" Lass asks. The snap of her camera is a jarring discord in the strange tableau.

Someone has strung Jordan Greene to the rafters in a mockery of a marionette, the fishing lines secured to each joint. Even from the door, Beverly can tell that the joints have been dislocated - she wonders if every possible joint that can be dislocated has been subject to the same treatment.

Jack walks in, each tread heavy and cautious, as though bearing a brimming cup filled with conflicted emotion. He leans in and takes a better look. "He's been scalped, and the killer stuck fishing hooks into his eyes."

"It's almost Ripper-esque," says Lass.

"No incisions on the body, which means no organs taken, which means not the Ripper," Beverly counters. She goes in and examines the room. "It's too clean though. Nothing out of place, hardly any dust. A cabin in the woods is not supposed to be this clean."

The squeal of tires outside herald the arrival of Price and Zeller. Jack exhales, a tired slump to his shoulders. "Process this room. Miriam, I want those photos on my desk as soon as possible. Right now I have to speak to the press again."

*****

"What kind of man killed Jordan Greene?" asks Jack.

Alana, Hannibal, and Chilton all study the picture, like they were students. Hannibal frowns. "It is reminiscent of the Ripper's work. The brutality of his injuries, and the theatricality of the presentation."

"Brutality is certainly present," says Chilton, cocking his head and playing with his cane, passing it from one hand to the other. "However, there are no incisions on the body cavity. I doubt it's the Ripper."

"I agree that it does remind me of the Ripper cases," Alana says. "But this feels very personal. A vigilante, perhaps?"

"A vigilante who knew one or more of the victims?" Jack suggests.

"Or simply a person who saw a chance and took it," says Chilton. "Saw an opportunity to play God."

Hannibal leans back in his chair. "The murders of the teenagers have certainly roused a great deal of anger in their communities. I'm ashamed to say that I'm pleased he met this fate, given what he has done to his victims."

"Hannibal," Alana murmurs in mild reprove. "Everyone is entitled to a fair trial. Whoever did this to him sentenced him."

Chilton taps his fingers on the cane. "Found him guilty."

"A one-man courtroom, playing judge, jury and executioner," says Jack thoughtfully. "Someone who enjoys being dominant."

"Dominance comes in many forms, Jack," says Hannibal. "The question is, is this killer exerting dominance over Jordan Greene, or over us?"

Jack has no response to that question.

*****

*****

With the Dollmaker case closed, the bodies are released for burial.

Matthew thinks he would have gone catatonic if Mikolaj hadn't come to his aid. The latter has taken charge, sorting out various arrangements and notices, easing the way for Matthew to hold a small funeral service for his mother and sister.

Everything from flowers to the coffins to the wording on the obituaries is done tastefully and simply. Mikolaj even picks up the tab for the coffins, much to Matthew's gratitude. He promises to return his friend the money in the future, but Mikolaj will have none of it.

"I loved Esther too," says Mikolaj after they have returned from the funeral home. "She was sweet."

"She was."

"The cleaners will come by the day after the service. You can stay with me while they do their work."

Matthew swallows. "I ca-can't thank you and Will enough for everything you've done."

"Then don't," says Mikolaj quietly. "What are friends for?"

After another lengthy pause, Matthew says, "I'll sell the house, get myself an apartment instead."

"You may want to hold off on the apartment-shopping, at least until you've settled."

"I can't live in the house, Miko, I'd... She's everywhere. I don't know how to live there without-" Matthew bites his tongue. "The killer's dead, and I just want him to be alive again

so I can kill him myself."

Mikolaj looks at him oddly. "He's already dead, Matthew. It's grief talking. Time will help."

"I hope it does," says Matthew, clasping his hands in his lap, trying not to recall how good it felt to carefully dislocate the joints in Greene's hands, and the slick feel of blood as he scalped the man.

*****

The service is attended by his mom's colleagues, some of his sister's classmates and their families, some teachers and the counselor from Esther's school, Mikolaj and Selina, and Will and Dr Lecter. Will sits with him during the pastor's short sermon, holding Matthew's hands while he struggles to keep his breathing steady; Dr Lecter has Theodore Bumble on his lap. The sight of the staid doctor with a worn-out teddy bear should be funny, but there is no mirth at all.

Then Matthew goes up to speak.

"I-I'm not good with words," he starts, and licks his lips. "And honestly, I'd rather b-e doing anything else but this. Yet I must face the reality that my family is gone. I wish I had told my mom a few things before she was murdered."

The silence in the church pews makes Matthew's hands sweat. He raises his gaze and sees Dr Lecter and Will, both watching him, and feels reassured.

"I wish I'd said thank you more often. Raising two children, one with a speech impe-impediment and another who requires more love and care than most children, doing that all by herself must have been extraordinarily difficult," says Matthew, glancing at his notes. "I didn't give her enough credit when she was alive. I wish I had... I wish I'd been more demonstrative, more kind in my tone, more grateful. I'm sorry Mom, I didn't understand. Thank you for what you have done for us. I do love you, and I wish I'd told you that."

Now for the harder part. Matthew's throat closes briefly and he feels like he might throw up, but he takes a shuddering breath to center himself.

"I never thought-" Matthew's voice cracks, and he has to clear his throat. "I never once thought I'd be... that I'll be giving my sister's eulogy. She was so full of life and laughter. From the first time I saw her smiling little face in the crib, I have loved my baby sister. I fed her, bathed her, changed her, and played with her. I was told that she was special, by which the doctors meant that she was slightly autistic. i didn't know that. I heard 'Esther is special', and she was the most special thing in my life."

"Eventually I understood that Esther needed more care and love from her family, and I was so happy to be the one giving her what she needed. True, she learned more slowly, and yet, somehow, more passionately. She was always excited to tell me what she learned, and boy, when it came to stars, did she learn a lot. And because she learned a lot, so did I."

A small ripple of laughter. Everyone there has heard Esther rattling off astronomical data like they were nursery rhymes. Matthew clutches the sides of the rostrum. His vision blurs with tears welling up, and he doesn't try to hide them.

"Sometime earlier this year, she told me that... that some stars we see in the night sky are already dead, but their light has only just reached us. And she wondered if her light would continue to shine on..." He wiped his cheeks. "Continue t-to shine on after we die. I know hers will, for all the rest of my life. Esther was my baby sister, she was my stars, my moon, my sun. She w-was my light. I love her, I'll always love her. A-and I just- I'm going to miss..."

He can barely see the papers in front of him. He turns to face the small coffin - so small! - and whispers, "Sweetheart, I'm going to miss you so much."

Matthew doesn't know how he returned to his seat; he has an inkling that Will led him down from the rostrum. He has burrowed his face into the shoulder of his friend's suit jacket, and his tears seep into the expensive fabric. Will runs his hand over Matthew's back, soothing him with touch, even as Matthew grieves anew for his loss.

*****

The last person to view the bodies, Hannibal carefully positions the teddy bear to the right of Esther's head. The wig came in time, styled properly; at least Matthew is spared the sight of her changed. For Mrs Brown, they place white roses; for Esther, Matthew requested that they place handfuls of little origami stars, in pretty, bright colors, and it seemed as though she is sleeping in them.

"We are made of starstuff, and you more than most," Hannibal whispers to Esther, and then goes to Will, who takes his hand. His boyfriend's cheeks are streaked with tears. Hannibal suspects his own composure is as shaken, but he rests his face to Will's as they take a second to gather themselves.

*****

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When they lower the coffins into the ground, Matthew clutches Will's hand so hard, he thinks he may have broken it. His mother's friends and colleagues offer a few words, none of which he heard, and then they are blessedly gone. Then come Esther's teachers, who shake his right hand and say nothing about the left that is holding on to Will's, Esther's friends, whom he bends down to hug, and then they are gone too.

The weather is abominably lovely. Red leaves float down whenever a breeze passes; the sky itself is an ethereal blue that bring out the same shade in Will's eyes.

Mikolaj and Selina are standing at a distance away, next to Dr Bloom and Agent Katz. Will is right beside him, keeping him from crumbling to pieces, and Dr Lecter's sturdy, silent presence is also reassuring. They walk over to their friends, and Matthew finally lets go of Will.

"You sure you'll be alright?" Will asks. He radiates concern, and Matthew can't help contrasting this Will with the same one that calmly pierced Jordan Greene's eyes.

"Yeah," says the nurse. "I need some... time. Alone."

"Call me if you need anything," says Will. "Promise me, Matthew. Anything at all, if you need me, you call me."

Matthew nods. "I will."

To his surprise, Will hugs him again, and murmurs in his ear, "You know we love you, right?"

"Yeah, I know. I love you too." Matthew risks pressing a tiny kiss to the side of Will's temple, and Dr Lecter only inclines his head slightly. "Thanks, Will, Dr Lecter. I owe you guys."

Chapter End Notes

I cried writing the eulogy for Esther.
By the way, I'm on tumblr and twitter

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They have not made love since Esther was first abducted, and so there is a strange sense of shyness as Will undoes each button of Hannibal's shirt. Their suit jackets are tossed over the back of a chair in the bedroom, and their ties lie discarded and entwined on the rug. Hannibal's movements are sure and graceful, and they can't stop drawing soft, tender kisses from each other as they undress. Their fingers skimmed over bared skin, leaving warmth and desire in their wake.

"Seems rather cliched of us," Will murmurs as Hannibal divests him of belt and pants and walks him backwards until his legs hit the bed.

"Having sex after a funeral?" The doctor pushes his lover down before he tugs off the remainder of his clothes. Will pulls lube out of their bedside drawer and tosses the container on the foot of the bed, and then lies back for Hannibal to crawl over him. "I would argue that it is instinctual. Copulation to replace what has been lost. It reminds us that we're alive."

"Save the philosophy for later, mon cœur," Will says, unaware of the endearment that has slipped from his tongue. He notices the glimmer in Hannibal's eyes, however, and is moved to kiss them, beguiling pools of wine that Will is more than willing to drown in.

There is little speaking after that. They share kisses slowly, their tongues sliding hot and eager together. Will relinquishes control, allowing Hannibal to move him and use him as the older man pleased. Hannibal tastes Will, his lips pressing delicately to suckle at each patch of skin. His tongue swipes tantalizingly over pert nipples; his surgeon's hands traced over the fine bones in Will's hands even as Hannibal sucks on the younger man's fingers.

Will can only be passive for so long. He curls his hand into Hannibal's hair, the strands winding around his fingers like finest silk. Everything was magnified and electrifying: the rasp of their limbs on sheets, the minute twitches and shifts of muscle, the puffs of air over sweat-slicked skin, the pulse thrumming in his veins. Will pushes at Hannibal's shoulders and rolls him onto his back, and then turns completely around so that they can suck each other off.

With one hand wrapped around the base of Hannibal's erection, Will works his lips and tongue languidly, relishing the salty muskiness that coats his tongue. He can't help the shaky moan that rippled from his abdomen when Hannibal swallows him in. They take their time, allowing the heat to build slowly. The young man wraps his mouth around the thick head, his tongue pushing at the slit, and then pulls away to let precome paint his lips, before rubbing his cheeks with the thick cock. Pushing Hannibal's legs apart further, he ventures down with his lips, the curls of Hannibal's pubic hair tickling his chin and nose. The scent of his lover is overwhelming; he wants to bathe in it, smother himself with the reminder that Hannibal is his, and he is Hannibal's. Hearing the older man's moan does something wonderful to Will's

skin, making it tingle. The coiling in his gut tells him that he is about to climax, and he doesn't want that yet.

"C-close," he tells his lover, the word slurring in his pleasure.

The older man draws away, smiling when Will whines, and slicks up his hand with the lube Will hands him. The psychiatrist changes positions, pulling Will flush against his chest while his fingers slide in to scissor and twist inside Will; the young man shudders at the burn and stretch. Every motion sends little licks of flame darting up Will's spine. He licks and nibbles at Hannibal's neck while his hands dig into his lover's chest and shoulder, the muscles tensing and relaxing under the contact. He can feel Hannibal's pulse under his tongue, strong and reassuring; he syncs up his breathing with his lover's, breathing in when Hannibal exhales, the air an exchange and a dance.

Soon and not soon enough, Hannibal withdraws his fingers. He lays Will out on the bed and crawls between lean legs, his hair falling into his eyes, his gaze haunted and hungry as he slicks himself up. Their breathing meet and commingle intimately; they breathe each other in.

Will reaches up and brushes his hands over the cheeks that make him want to do terrible, *terrible* things for this man. Dark eyes are grow impossibly darker, deep wells of contained obsession ringed with scarlet love. Will knows he's flushed and sweaty; he's distracted by the feel of Hannibal's calves against the soles of his feet as he draws up his legs. His eyelashes flutter and his mouth goes dry with want.

Hannibal runs his hand down Will's right flank and squeezes a handful of flesh. There is an unspoken query, a tender uncertainty that Hannibal hasn't voiced.

"I'm yours," Will whispers, answering the silent plea, and gasps as Hannibal enters him. He wraps his legs around his lover, his hands grasping at muscular biceps, and he smiles up, lips parted. The older man's answering smile is tender and possessive and dark as sin.

Hannibal sets a steady pace, thrusting into Will's heat firmly; he burrows against Will's neck, teeth and lips latching onto skin. There will be a blossom of deep purplish blue tomorrow, and Will feels his excitement ratchet up a notch when he feels sharp, uneven teeth sink into his flesh.

Hannibal tastes blood where he's biting Will. That coppery, intimate taste floods him with a fevered desire to *possess;* his hips snap forward more powerfully than before, thrusting as deep as their bodies allow, driving a choked cry from his lover like he's chased all air out of Will. The sound and taste of the younger man blinds Hannibal to all other consideration.

He feels his heart beating wildly, or maybe two hearts thundering at the same time, one whose rhythm he can taste under his tongue - the breathless sobbing gasps of his lover - the stings on his back where Will has clawed into him - the tension in his muscles as he pushes himself closer and closer to his climax - the stiffening of Will's body beneath his - the scream that sets off the dogs in the yard -

Hannibal climaxes with a stifled groan. His brain melts to numbing static, and all he registers is his lover's presence under and around him, his scent and heat and taste and voice.

*****

When they have cleaned off, calmed the dogs, and changed the sheets, they curl up together, Will pillowed on Hannibal's chest. The young man absently drums his fingers on his lover's belly in time to the heartbeat he hears. Hannibal is whispering something in Italian that makes Will's heart ache, though the latter doesn't know what Hannibal is reciting.

"*...così tra questa immensità s'annega il pensier mio: e il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare*," Hannibal presses the words into Will's curls with a sigh.

"Have you ever wanted children?" asks Will, apropos of nothing.

"I have never considered having a child," says Hannibal. "After meeting Esther, I understood the appeal. The joy of supporting and directing a young life. Yet I do not feel a need to have children."

Will sighs and nuzzles into Hannibal's neck. "We are going to miss her so much."

"Yes we are." Hannibal leans down and kisses Will on the mouth, nibbling gently on the reddened lower lip. "Why did you ask?"

"I don't know. I'm... I guess the funeral had me thinking," says Will. "If we are to have a child, I'd love for them to have your genes. Your eyes, your cheekbones, your intelligence. To be like you as much as possible."

Hannibal smiles. "I would rather they bear your genes, mon amour. Your dark curls and blue eyes, your mind. Your innate goodness."

"I blinded a man with fishing hooks, and you call me good?"

"Good doesn't mean nice."

"Good doesn't mean killing people, or watching people kill others, Hannibal, and I have done both." Will shifts up to lie on the pillow, his expression somber but tranquil. "I'm not the boy that I used to be. I've let that all go. Good, bad... It doesn't matter."

"It matters. You have your personal definition of good and bad, different from that dictated by society. You are good, by my definition, and certainly by Matthew's." Hannibal caresses Will's hair, trailing his fingers down the curve of the neck and over his bare chest. "I find myself entranced by contemplation of what you will become. You change and yet you remain the same; I can never predict you fully."

"Would you like me to stop?" Will asks, all sincerity.

Hannibal knows that if he says yes, then his lover will cease to cultivate the darker urges of his beautiful, bloody soul. Life will be like this: Hannibal choosing his kills, Will watching the performance meant just for his eyes alone, them living out their days. It's safe, and it's alluring. Hannibal entertains the thought for a moment. Then the psychiatrist shakes his head. "I want to watch you grow into whatever you are meant to become."

The young man returns to his spot on Hannibal's chest. "What I become may be a monster you have to put down, or maybe a monster that ends you."

"We are both monsters, but we are monsters that love, mon rêve; I do not and will not fear you." Hannibal kisses Will again, suckling on his lower lip. "I am curious as to what lurks in the darkness behind your eyes."

Will smiles and lets his eyes fall shut. "The art that is our collaboration. You watching from the door as we executed Matthew's vision, guiding our hands as we broke him into little pieces. The fishing lines like strands of a cobweb. The wreath from the confession, folded and wired to perfection. A gift to condemn both the lesser hunter and the prey."

"Both of you looked exquisite with your hands covered in blood," says Hannibal in a low voice. "A baptism in death."

"A rebirth into bonds of blood." Will hums, and then sighs again. "I wish Esther didn't have to be murdered for Matthew to come on this path. I'd rather he never come on this path than for her to leave us."

"Mischa was killed and I was remade. Your father was killed and you were remade. All creation stems from destruction, and destruction is sometimes painful beyond measure." Hannibal traces patterns like filigree over Will's skin. "Would I sacrifice this bliss with you for Mischa to return to me? Would you give all up all we have for your father?"

Will is silent. Then he peers up into Hannibal's gaze, and trails a finger over Hannibal's sensuous mouth. "My choice is always you. My choice will always be you."

They smile at each other, soft and sad. Will notices that Hannibal never states whom he would have wanted by his side, but lets it go. He already has Hannibal for the rest of his life, which is far more than Mischa ever had the chance to have.

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True to Mikolaj's word, the whole house has been packed, save for Esther's room and the heavier furniture. Matthew walks to the closed door and puts his hand on it, his resolve wavering now that he's actually in the house. Mikolaj, who had dinner with him earlier, offered for Matthew to stay with him and Selina for the night, but Matthew declined.

It is so quiet without his baby sister's constant chatter.

The silence weighs on Matthew's shoulders and he turns away. He texts Will, knowing that his best friend will want to know that he is home and safe. For a given value of home, anyway.

His bed is still there, though most of his things have been put into boxes. All he has left unpacked are the things he took to Dr Lecter's house. Curling up on the bed, Matthew wishes he still can feel the same grief that had ripped him open when he first realized Esther was

dead. The crushing guilt that they never made up from their argument. The clean rage that suffused him as he tortured and killed the man who murdered his baby sister.

All he feels is nothing.

He closes his eyes, and sleep comes to him between one heartbeat and the next.

*****

They are lying in an open field, the grass cool beneath them, and the Milky Way is spread out above them, far brighter than Matthew has ever witnessed it before. He is awestruck by how beautiful it all is the pure darkness around them, when there is no other light to interfere.

Esther rests her head on his shoulder. She is wearing a pretty golden dress that shimmers faintly. "I think that constellation isn't supposed to be there. Or that one either."

"Which ones, sweetie?"

"Serpens and Vulpecula." Emily reaches up and takes a handful of stars, easily plucking them from the canvas above. "Here, take them."

Matthew sits up and cups his hands. His sister pours the tiny, glittering stars into his palms, and he closes his fingers around the precious things. "What do I do with them?"

"Keep them close to you," says Esther, as seriously as she has ever been.

Matthew clutches the stars to his heart. They are warm, pulsing gently, like tiny hearts. "I'm going to tattoo the Bears over my heart. Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, like we agreed. You get to trace them."

Esther smiles, and throws her arms around Matthew in a hug. He tries to hug her back, but he doesn't, fearful that he will drop the stars she gave him. Esther doesn't seem to notice, however.

"I'm your Little Bear," she says with a brilliant smile as she sits back on her heels. "But you aren't a Big Bear."

"I am your brother. Of course I'm a bear."

"Yes, you're my brother, but you aren't a bear. You are Aquila. I want you to have that, here," she says solemnly, patting his right pectoral. "That's where it's gonna go. You're the eagle soaring into the stars, every night."

The wind picks up and ruffles Esther's hair, blowing it into her eyes. Matthew pushes the tendrils from his sister's face, forgetting about the stars she gave him, and they roll down her chubby cheeks like glittering tears.

"Oh no, I'm sorry sweetheart, I didn't mean to drop them-"

"It's all right, they're with you, they'll always be with you," she says, her smile oddly sad and tender.

Matthew feels his heart clench. "And you?"

"I'm your little bear," says Esther. "I'm gonna watch over you, the way you've watched over me. And I'll pretend I don't see what you don't want me to see, okay?"

"Sweetheart, I-"

*****

Matthew wakes, and finds his pillow soaked with tears. He ignores the dryness in his throat and the stickiness of his face. Instead, he digs out his laptop, and looks for the list of constellations.

Serpens. Snake.

Vulpecula. Fox

Aquila. Eagle.

He shuts it down. For a long moment, he stares blankly at his wall and listens to his heartbeat. Then he covers his face, and smiles, even as tears seep from between his fingers again.

*****

At work, most of the guys are cautiously friendly to Matthew. Throughout the first week he manages tiny micro-smiles when he's passed an extra mug of coffee that they've brewed, or given the sandwich they bought one more of, or invited out to drinks which he tactfully turns down. Dr Freyman doesn't treat him any different except for the grandmotherly hug on his first day back after the funerals, and then it's back to giving out medications according to her instructions.

Chilton doesn't cut Matthew any slack, though he does allow the nurse to sit on the side of the room rather than right in front of Gideon during the sessions. Not that it helps much: the psychotic loves leering at Matthew anyway. Matthew ignores him. He finds it easy to do that now - he just channels the numbness that buzzed beneath his skin the evening of the funerals.

Barney is calmly protective and takes on the duty of escorting Gideon into his sessions, and he is an assuring presence to be next to. There's something very solid and down-to-earth about Barney that Matthew wishes he possessed himself. Chilton tests and interviews Gideon, who plays with the psychiatrist like a cat plays with an overly curious rat. Matthew watches, but doesn't feel anything.

He texts Will whenever he gets home, because his best friend is behaving like a mother hen, and Matthew finds it amusing and touching at the same time. For dinner, he keeps to simple sandwiches or pasta. Every night, while he watches shows on Netflix, he's scouring the classifieds for an apartment he can afford. The house should sell relatively easily - the

neighborhood's decent, there are schools nearby, and it's fairly convenient to get around even without a car. He'll have to sell the house first if he wants to make a down payment on an apartment though, but he is sure Will can put him up in the interim.

Perhaps the routine helped calm him down, because on his next day off, he goes into his sister's room and bags everything for charity, except for her first coloring book and one of her writing exercise books. Those he puts into his suitcase, the one he's living out of. The rest he hauls to Salvation Army and leaves it there.

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"She's like a bulldog," Beverly complains to Alana in the car. "Bloody tenacious - which is good, because I am that too, don't get me wrong - but stubborn. Doesn't even consider a different point of view."

"I'm sorry to hear that, darling," says the psychiatrist. She checks her watch. "But your mother does have a point about our families all having to fly into Baltimore. It is rather out of the way."

"But she wants us to go to Florida for it! Old people country with alligators and swamps and mosquitoes the size of Buicks. No way, Lanie. I'd rather hold our wedding in... in Cleveland." Beverly turns into the road leading to Hannibal's house.

"Don't knock Cleveland, we may meet some celebrities filming there."

"You and your Hiddleston obsession. Should I be concerned? Anyway, sorry I've ranted for the whole drive over. How's your article coming along?"

Alana grimaces. "What with the whole Dollmaker case and, well, Esther, Hannibal and I haven't been able to sit down and discuss what we want to focus on."

"It's been more than a week, it should be okay to raise the topic. You can talk shop with him later, Will and I can occupy ourselves." Beverly parks the car but just sits there, ruminating. "I know we've forgotten something. What did we forget?"

Frowning faintly, Alana looks in the backseat and then at her fiancee. Then her eyes crinkle with amusement. "We forgot beer."

"Ach, damn it. You want me to run to the shops?"

"Forget it," says Alana. "He has terrific wine."

The two women exchange a tender kiss, and Beverly squeezes Alana's hand. "I honestly can't wait till the day we bicker over who left the dishes in the dishwasher."

Alana giggles. "I always clear it, silly. And we already bicker."

"Mm. Guess we're as good as married then."

"Keep that up and we'll be late to dinner," Alana warns, a pretty flush spreading over her cheeks.

Beverly grins wickedly. "Right out here in front of Hannibal's house? Ooh, Lanie, you *vixen*."

*****

"You look really red," Will says as he takes Alana's coat. "Did Bev say or do something kinky again?"

"What do you mean 'again'?" Beverly pretends outrage.

Unimpressed, Will just gives her the side-eye. "You gave me sex toys on practically every gift-giving occasion for the past two years. You don't get to act all offended."

Alana just covers her face and shakes her head.

"I'm improving your sex life." Beverly nods sagely.

"My sex life is plenty fine," Will retorts, just as they enter the kitchen.

Hannibal is working his usual magic at the stove. The air is redolent with the aroma of perfectly seared meat and something creamy. "Alana, Beverly, good evening. What was that about our sex life, Will?"

Will wanders over to the stove and preens smugly at Hannibal. "That it's plenty fine. Perfect, even. Especially when you do that thing with your lips and then when you use your tongue-"

"Ah, now, now. Some things must remain private, mongoose," says Hannibal with a tiny smirk, and draws Will in for a kiss. They share a secretive little smile, and then Hannibal turns to the other couple. "Alana, are you all right? Would you like a drink?"

"I'll help myself," squeaks Alana, her face entirely pink with mortification. She takes the decanter and pours a glass for herself. "I could have lived my whole life without hearing any of *that*."

Beverly grins wickedly. "Unlike Lanie, I would love to hear a lot more of *that.* Do continue. What thing, exactly, does Hannibal do with his tongue? Do you have visual aids?"

"Beverly!" Alana pours another glass for her fiancee and drags her out to the backyard to say hi to the dogs.

When they hear Winston and Buster bark joyously, Hannibal nips Will's ear and casts a mock-questioning look at his lover. "That *thing* with my lips and my tongue?"

*****

It's all remarkably domestic and lovely, Hannibal considers over dinner: the easy conversation, Will's loving affection, the friendliness of the two women.

They have been talking about Will's decision to study music education. Alana apparently knows someone who knows someone else in the School of Music, and there's a debate over what Will may find challenging about the college experience.

Hannibal finds the idea of Will attending college disconcerting. He excuses himself to clear the dishes, Beverly rising to assist, and he enlists her in assisting with dessert.

"What are we having, doc?" she asks.

"Tarte de pommes a la Normande," he says with a quick smile. "Or, in American, as Will likes to say, French apple tart. There's French vanilla ice cream in the freezer."

Entrusted with the task of scooping ice cream, Beverly chuckles. "There's something I envy about your relationship, doc. I mean, me and Lanie, we have our moments, but you two are something else altogether. If I actually believed in such things, I'd say you were soulmates."

"We've had bad times," says Hannibal, deliberately not thinking of the time he nearly strangled Will and Will choosing not to fight back. "Matthew can tell you about some of the fights Will and I had in the early days of our relationship. Because of him and Esther, Will never gave up on us."

Beverly pauses. "I didn't want to ask at the table, but how is Matthew doing?"

"He's back at work," says Hannibal, and sighs. "Will calls him every night. He's still grieving, of course. Apparently he's unable to pack up her room but doesn't want others to pack it up for her, so that is the current stalemate. Will wants to go and help; Matthew doesn't want him to."

"It'll take time. When my grandma passed, my mom left everything in her house alone for three months before she could even bear stepping inside."

Hannibal picks up the dessert. "We're mainly concerned that he's all alone in that house. He doesn't want to stay with us or with Mikolaj, and his father hasn't contacted him at all. I'm worried."

"We can only do so much," says Beverly, picking up the remaining two plates. "Sometimes people have to learn to be strong by themselves."

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"Nothing on Jordan Greene's killer, except that he uses a taser to stun his victim." Zeller leans back in his chair, twirling his pen with insane dexterity. "There's a lot of anger though. The scalping was done with minimal hesitation with what I think is a hunting knife. Either he or she-" the agent nods at Hannibal "-is a skilled scalper, or they're used to skinning things."

"A hunter, perhaps?" Hannibal suggests. "Were there other incisions on the body?"

"No. But the dislocations were all very precisely done. Almost medically precise."

Hannibal looks at Jack. "You know my opinion. I concur with Agent Lass on this."

Miriam inclines her head at the mention, but says nothing.

"It doesn't match the Ripper's MO, Dr Lecter. No surgical incisions or trophies."

"No, but the sheer brutality and the theatrical presentation are signatures of the Ripper. Murderers can adapt. This man had abused and made mockeries of children. The Ripper may have felt compelled to act, to punish his transgressions against the... gruesome art that the Ripper so enjoys."

Beverly folds her arms. "And the signed confessions?"

Hannibal purses his lips. "I suppose to assure us that he has killed the right man?"

"I don't believe that to be true." Jack stands up, his dark suit giving his presence greater gravitas. "This is a new person. There's something... raw about this kill. Zee, you said that there was a lot of anger."

"Yeah, that was the impression Jim and I got," says Zeller.

Jack nods slowly. "The Ripper doesn't feel anger towards his victims, Dr Lecter. This is definitely someone new. And my gut tells me, something similar happened to Clark Ingram. That he was punished for his crimes."

Everyone sees Beverly tense and straighten. No one mentions it.

"Ingram may have fled the country," says Miriam, after a glance at Beverly's dark expression. "We lost him."

"It could be that he's dead." Jack works his jaw. "Work with me, Hannibal. If this is a fledgling killer, what is his motive?"

Hannibal takes note of the use of his first name. Jack is a canny man, intelligent in his own peculiar way. Using Hannibal's first name is a purposeful decision on the experienced agent's part. Tilting his head in consideration, the Ripper within smiles at how the determined agent has led himself off the right path.

"I assume he wants justice. It's someone who followed the cases, is aware of the modus operandi of the killers. They know where to find out suspects - in Ingram's case, he walked right out of the FBI, and abducted Alana Bloom, so the killer may have seen him in action."

"But Jordan Greene being a suspect isn't really known until he went missing," says Beverly. Her jaw tightens. "Jack, that means it could be anyone from the FBI. Any agent in contact with the case could find out who we were looking for, and this was a high profile case."

"We can't launch a mole hunt," Jimmy Price protests. "It'll be chaos."

"I won't raise the alarm unless I have something to raise it with. Now, this notion of an inside job stays within this team, all right? I've worked with all of you for years, and I trust you

guys, but I'm going to need alibis for the night Ingram went missing, and the duration of time from when Jordan Greene was abducted from the parking lot to the time he was found in the barn. Hannibal, I'd appreciate one from you. I'll have to call Dr Chilton too."

Hannibal smiles in that minute way of his. "I will endeavor to recall what happened in that duration, though I do believe most of the time, I was with Will, providing support for Matthew Brown."

At the mention of Matthew, the team quietens. Almost all of them have interacted with Will, and to a certain extent are sympathizing with Will more than with Matthew. Hannibal lets the emotion seep in a little longer, and then gathers his coat. "If that is all, I shall need to go home. Jack, I'll email you the information you need."

"A profile would be very useful too, please."

"Of course," says Hannibal.

He strides out, confident and pleased by the developments, and hides his amusement. Before he gets to the main doors, Miriam Lass catches up to him.

She brushes a few tendrils from her face. "Dr Lecter, do you truly think it's the Ripper?" she asks, *sotto voce*.

"It's a gut feeling," says Hannibal, "or perhaps, thin-slicing. I have studied the Ripper for years. The scene of Jordan Greene's death echoes with the voice of the Ripper, even if the art that remains is not of his signature."

"I wouldn't call what the Ripper does *art*," says Lass with a frown. "It's all twisted and sick murders. There is no art in it."

"The art is in his mind, not in his audience's," Hannibal corrects, though he mentally files away her insult to his craft. "You wanted to speak with me just on this?"

Lass licks her lips and glances around, checks that no one is watching her. "I've been studying his previous kills from four, five years ago, before he disappeared after the Lounds' case. I have some theories and, since you have ideas, perhaps I could discuss them with you? The rest of the team aren't going to work with me on this, they're so certain it's someone else."

Hannibal considers. "My last appointments generally end no later than eight at night, barring special cases. You can always come by my office some time after work this week, and we shall ruminate together."

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"Morning Dr Freyman," says Matthew, brushing down his scrubs. "I didn't see your car out there. Thought you were going to finally call in sick after twelve years."

The doctor only smiles reprovingly. "Good morning Matthew. It's good to see you in better spirits."

Matthew returns a slight smile, and starts laying out trays with the requisite paper cups with names labeled on each one. "She wouldn't have wanted me to make everyone sad."

"Nothing wrong with grieving, my boy. It's something we must experience to remind us of how much we loved and still love." Dr Freyman checked each cup's dosage. "However, life goes on. You have to go on, change, grow."

Matthew nods. "I'm thinking of getting tattoos, actually."

Dr Freyman looks at him sharply. "Where? Not where it shows, I hope. Lots of hospitals are still picky about that sort of thing."

Matthew points to his chest. "Here. And maybe one behind each shoulder."

"Interesting," says Dr Freyman noncommittally. "Come on, dole the pills out faster. If an old doddering doctor can check faster than you work, you need to be replaced. Don't make me kick your pretty boy arse downstairs, all right?"

He grins at the warmth in her tone. It's good to smile, he discovers, and surprising that he remembers how to.

*****

At the end of Dr Freyman's shift, she tugs off the doctor's coat and tosses it into the laundry bag. "Walk me out, Matthew."

"Sure." The nurse puts away the sterilized equipment deftly and then pulls off his gloves. "Why?"

"Because I am an old lady and I'm asking," says the doctor with a twinkle in her eyes.

When he has escorted her to the front step, they're hailed by a perky young woman in bright blue and teal hair. Dr Freyman was practically preening when she said, "That's my grandniece. She's a tattoo artist, she's nice, and if she thinks you're okay then I will help you snag her. And if you do date her and you break her heart, I will rip off your testes and hang them outside Chilton's door."

"O-kay." Matthew glances at the doctor with his eyebrows raised. "That was very... vivid... imagery. And, uh... thanks, I think."

"I work in a mental hospital for the criminally insane, did you think I was completely all right in the noodle?" Dr Freyman walked sedately up to her grandniece.

"Hey Aunt Elaine," says the young woman and grins. "You're up to something again."

"Nonsense. Delia, this is Matthew Brown. Matthew, this is Delia Verity. She's a tattoo artist, he's a quiet and capable nurse who helps me in the hospital, and he's rather handsome. Oh,

look, I forgot my purse, I'm going in to get it now, I'm going to take some time." Dr Freyman saunters off and, at the doorway, glares at them both affectionately. "Talk to each other."

The door shuts behind her.

Matthew rubs the back of her neck. "I... was not expecting this. Hi."

"Hi," says Delia with a shy but amused smile. "She does it a lot. Thinks I need a boyfriend."

"I'm glad she thinks I can be in the running," says Matthew.

Delia giggles. "You're probably one of the more decent-looking guys in my life. She's appalled by all the 'ruffians' I used to date, but they were nice people."

"I haven't dated a lot." Matthew rubs his hand over his mouth. "Um. So. You're a-a tattoo artist?"

"Yeah!" Delia rolls up a flannel sleeve to reveal a tattooed arm. It is as though someone has painted watercolor on her skin. "This isn't my work, but I designed it, and I do lots of watercolor tats."

Matthew thinks it's really pretty, and says so.

Delia cocks her head. "You ever thought of getting inked?"

"Actually," says Matthew, somewhat shyly, "I am. I haven't come up with a design or anything but I know what I want."

"Oh? Tell me."

"A bear and an eagle here," he says, gesturing across his pectorals, "and a snake and a fox on my shoulders."

"That's... different."

"They're constellations. My sister loves... my sister loved the stars and constellations, and... I just thought it'd be a good way to honor her love for the stars. To honor her."

The tattoo artist's face softens. "Oh. I'm sorry for your loss."

From her eyes, he sees that she's genuine in her emotion, though she doesn't know him nor Esther. He manages a weak smile. "Thank you. I'm still coming to terms with it myself."

There is a slightly awkward silence, and then Delia digs into her pocket to fish out a card. "Here. That's the parlor where I work, and my number. If you don't mind, I can come up with some designs and maybe you'll have a better idea what you'd like for your tattoos. Gimme a week or so, and I'll text you."

Matthew takes the name card, which is somewhat foxed on the corners, and says, "Thanks. Um, I should give you my number then?"

"Yeah," says Delia with a small smile. She has dimples on the corners of her mouth and crinkles around her dark brown eyes when she smiles.

Just as he keys it into her cell phone, Dr Freyman comes out. She takes in the scene and smiles smugly. "All right then, Delia, send me home. Matthew, thank you for walking me out today, and make sure you tidy up the workstation and disinfect the tables before you go off your shift. Dr Goh should be coming by any time now to take over."

With a small wave, Matthew jogs back to the hospital, and thinks if it's appropriate to want to move on so soon after his sister's death. The name card he tucks into his backpack, and he decides not to think about it until he has to.

Chapter End Notes

Mon cœur - My heart
"Così tra questa / immensità s’annega il pensier mio: / e il naufragar m’è dolce in questo mare."
So in this / immensity drown my own thoughts: / and sinking in this sea is sweet to me.
I took this from Giacomo Leopardi's L'infinito, a poem on nature and mortality. Since Will is associated with nature and growing things, I thought Hannibal's mind is likely to land upon this bittersweet poem.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

> I have been busy with NaNoWriMo and then a 3-week trip to NZ and Bali, so I haven't eked out much time to update, but here it is! Sorry for the wait!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Hey," says Will at the door with a lopsided smile. "May I come in? I brought a hot dinner to pay my way."

Matthew opens the door more widely. "Sure, bribe me with good food. Hi, Dr Lecter."

"Good evening, Matthew." Hannibal kisses Will on the lips. "I'll pick you up when I'm done?"

"Mm-hmm. See ya."

"Have fun," says Dr Lecter, and pats Matthew on the shoulder with a genial smile that shows mainly around his eyes. "It's good to see you, Matthew."

Matthew colors faintly at the affection in the older man's tone. "You too, sir. You're not staying?"

Will interrupts with mock exasperation, "He's got a wine-tasting thing with all his psychiatrist friends. Psychoanalysis and self-important shrink talk *everywhere.* It's a nightmare."

"You are a nightmare, Will Graham," Dr Lecter retorts, and kisses Will again, this time on the cheek, before he strides off. Matthew watches Will watch his boyfriend drive off, the latter's attention fully on the retreating Bentley.

Nearly four years and still utterly besotted. It was astounding.

Once further into the house, Will takes a good look around and whistles softly. "Mikolaj really had everything packed up, huh."

"Yeah, he did a great job." Matthew nods, setting out utensils and digging out two cans of soda. Trying to keep his tone casual, he says, "I p-acked up Esther's room, sent off almost everything in it to charity. Um, I-I've kept a couple of books of hers. I'd like you and Dr Lecter to ha-have one of them."

He's surprised by Will coming over to him to take the drinks. There is a gratified warmth in Will's gaze as he says, "Thank you, Mattie. You don't have to, you know."

"She'd have wanted to," says Matthew softly. "She loved Dr Lecter, and you're my best friend. She'd have wanted to give you something."

Will gazes at him, his blue-gray eyes soft and welcoming, though the small curve on his lips was sad. "Thanks. I really appreciate that you'd let us have a small part of her."

For a heartbeat or two, Matthew lets himself fantasize. Imagines moving close, dusting his own mouth over Will's, again, pretends it's all about solace.

He lets himself imagine, and then lets it go, simply because Matthew can never mean as much to Will as Dr Lecter does. Instead, he smiles at Will and hugs his best friend, pressing his nose to dark chocolate curls smelling of lavender and sandalwood.

*****

As Will clears away the dishes, he thinks about that strange glimmer in Matthew's gaze earlier. He isn't unaware that, after Esther's death, the relationship between him and Matthew has transmuted into something deeper than friendship, stronger than kinship. It's a love forged in death and blood. It's not passion, nor is it compassion; grief over Esther and the subsequent torture and murder of Jordan Greene - Will still feels a frisson of vindictive, justified pleasure over the slow death of that waste of skin and breath - has bonded them together.

There's a heat there between them, different from the desire he feels for Hannibal, yet draws Will in regardless. He likes touching Matthew, feeling a skin-to-skin connection, as though he has to make sure that Matthew's still there. As though to be certain that Will hasn't driven his one true friend away.

They have to recalibrate their understanding of each other, and Will isn't certain where to begin. There is no word in Will's lexicon that can describe what he has with his best friend. It is something that is entirely other from his possessive and all-consuming love for Hannibal.

However, when he now looks at his friend, he recognizes that it's not the best time to discuss their relationship. Matthew appears tired; his undereye circles look nearly purple. There is a haggard cast to his features, and he can't hide the slight drag to his motions. The nurse looks wrung out. Will doubts Matthew is sleeping well.

"Mattie, are you sure you want to stay here until you get an apartment? Hannibal and I really don't mind having you with us," he says as he packs up the thermal storage containers and puts them back in the bag.

Matthew glances over while putting away the cleaned utensils. "It's okay, Will. I don't want to impose any further."

Will zips up the bag and chews on the inside of his cheek. "I'm worried."

"I'll be fine," says Matthew, thumping Will on the shoulder as he passes. "I have to get used to the solitude."

The taller young man goes to the sofa and practically collapses onto it with a drawn-out sigh.

Will hesitates, and then goes to sit down next to Matthew. "Am I smothering you? Because I know I've been calling you every night and, well, I may, um. I don't want to be too... I'm concerned, and I'm afraid my concern may be overwhelming."

"Nah." Matthew reaches up and caresses Will's cheek fondly. "You're cute when you're flustered."

"Fuck off," Will says with a flush to his cheeks and an exasperated grin.

"I don't really mind. Yet. I like that you're worried about me," says Matthew. "I like that there's someone who wants to hear from me at the end of the day. Wants to hear how it went."

He doesn't add, *like Esther used to*, but the words hang in the air between them regardless.

"Then I can keep calling you every evening?"

"Yeah. Until I ask you to stop, anyway."

Will has to fight down his amusement when he says, "Any future girlfriend of yours is going to think I'm a threat when they check your call history. Might even think of me as the other woman. Or man, as it is."

"Aren't you?" asks Matthew rhetorically. The mood changes abruptly. Matthew's gaze is steady and unflinching, but a tiny, knowing smile pays around his eyes. "The other man."

"I am." Will licks his lips and nods. "There's a part of you that'll always be mine."

"You have more of me than anyone else." Matthew's lips curl even further. "What else do you want of me, Will? My body? My heart?"

There it is, out in the open. It's probably Matthew's fatigue that loosens his tongue, but he can't take them back.

Will licks his lips. "I don't want that of our friendship. Of you. "

"Then what do you want of me?"

"I want only that part of you that was with me when we were in the workshop. And when we strung up that filth. That part of you that you hide from every other person. That, I want."

"You want the killer in me," says the taller young man evenly, casually. He leans against the back of the sofa. "What do I do with the rest of me, Will? Be torn in two for the rest of my life?"

"When you feel torn, come to me. You know I have that in me too. I hide too. But when we're together, we can be honest. Neither of us will have to put on a mask, to hide that darkness."

Matthew exhales a laugh, and presses a brotherly kiss on Will's brow. "You're a goddamn idealist. This isn't sustainable. We can't - we can't feed that darkness what it needs. One day it'll swallow us, and we'll be caught. One of us, anyway."

"Mattie-"

"We have to stop, Will. You can't keep luring me into the shadows. It's not safe for me to stand with you in that darkness, not yet. You have someone to guide you - I don't." Matthew sighs again and runs his hands through his short hair. They both are aware that, if circumstances become dire, it will not be Matthew that Hannibal saves.

Chagrined, Will bites his upper lip. "You do have to live your own life."

"I do, yes." Matthew relaxes into his seat. "Which, um, brings me to a neat segue in that I met a girl. Or rather, I was made to meet a girl by Dr Freyman from the BSHCI. She's a tattooist."

"Oh, and you're telling me this why?"

"Because I want you to meet her first," says Matthew, cocking his head at Will. "I might as well get you to vet my potential girlfriends first. Saves me the trouble of you stalking her afterwards to find out if she has a darker side."

Will elbows him. "I did that one time-"

"-and you tried to coerce me into murdering her-"

"-I also did that just the ONE time," the younger man protests, and has to block Matthew's friendly tackle with a cushion from the sofa. Will grins. "Fine. She pretty?"

Matthew smiles. "Yeah. Yeah she is. It's kinda really soon, I guess, after... after what happened, to think of moving on. But I... I need to step outside of this. She wouldn't want me to w-allow. To... not live. She wouldn't. So I won't."

Will shifts closer and pulls his best friend into a hug, allowing the taller guy to bury his face into the crook of Will's shoulder, and Matthew returns the embrace. They don't say anything else.

*****

If Hannibal finds Will withdrawn on the way back home, he doesn't comment on it. The younger man gazes out the window throughout the journey, while his fingers drum in a steady rhythm on his left knee.

"Can I meet you tomorrow after work?" asks Will when they have parked. "At your office. I need to talk."

"We can't do that at home?" Hannibal says, faintly concerned.

"I want - I need - objectivity. Distance. I can't get that at home." Will inhales deeply and lets out his breath slowly. "My thoughts feel like a tangled skein of yarn, and I need your help to undo the snarls and knots."

Hannibal leans over and they kiss, soft and gentle in the dark. "I can do that."

"Thank you."

"After my final appointment? Mr Rossall will be done by 6.30."

"I can get there by then," says Will with a tiny smile. "I have to help with the Chickering for the morning before Mr Curtis takes over on the keys, and then I'm going out to a client to tune their Steinway, so I can go over directly from the client's place."

*****

*****

Beverly rotates her wrists and then rolls her shoulders. It's only five-thirty and she is really dragging. Even Jimmy and Brian have commented on her uncharacteristic lack of energy.

She feels twice her age; she really shouldn't have met up with her college roommate for drinks last night, but Marya so seldom came to this part of the world (Washington DC, anyway) so Beverly felt obliged. Anyway, Alana liked meeting Marya. And the look on Marya's face when Alana asked if she and Bev have ever been an item - Beverly grins broadly to herself. Lanie has an underlying jealous streak that she controls wonderfully, and to see it flare up, even that briefly, made Beverly feel quite fond of her fiancee.

"Hi Katz," says Miriam Lass, walking into the office and handing over a thin folder. The blonde peers at Beverly. "You look kinda tired."

"Late night," says Beverly. "Can't wait to sprawl out in my bed once this stupid report is complete. And you look way too perky for closing time. What's up?"

"Found something on Greene that may give us a hint," says Lass. "Stun gun marks at the back of his neck - which you know - and GSR."

"Gunshot residue? He wasn't shot."

Lass looks positively smug. "No, but it was pressed into his scalp. Someone forced him to write the confession."

Beverly chews on her lower lip. "We know he was tortured to death."

"And it'll be near impossible to put up that sort of display without help."

"You're thinking accomplice."

Lass nods solemnly. She drags an empty chair over and sits down, pulling pictures from the crime scene. "I know we've practically bagged the whole cabin where he was found, and the analysis of every frigging bit has come up useless. So, let's think motive. Torture and a forced confession usually indicates revenge."

Beverly raises an eyebrow. "Any one of the families would have gladly done what was done to Greene."

"Only one person has a means of finding out what was going on in the investigation," says Lass. There is something ominous in her tone.

Curious and oddly threatened, Beverly leans closer. "I don't like riddles."

"Matthew Brown's best friend is Will Graham, who's so-called boyfriend was actively involved in the profiling the perpetrator." Lass tugs on her earlobe. "I know it's... I know they're your friends, but I do think that it's a possibility that Matthew Brown got some information out of Dr Lecter that he maybe shouldn't have."

Beverly stares at Lass. "You realize that if you're right, then Hannibal could be charged with aiding and abetting."

"I know."

"And there were many other people involved in the investigation also," the Asian woman continues. "I mean, Alana was helping Esther and her mom deal with the Randall Tier attack and she was involved in consulting on the case. Hell, Chilton is Matthew's boss. If we're looking, we'll find connections anywhere."

Lass just looks at her. "Matthew Brown is a common thread, you realize?"

Beverly blows out a breath. "He's been staying with Will Graham throughout- no. No way."

"It fits."

"It's conjecture and guesswork. You have no proof, Miriam. Matthew Brown was staying at Hanibal's place, and Will took time off to keep him company. And, disregarding the lack of proof, I cannot picture either of them being vicious killers."

Miriam scoffs. "It's not as though they'll have the words 'serial killer' stamped on their foreheads. Ted Bundy worked a suicide hotline."

Beverly leans forward on her elbows. "I've known Will for years. Practically watched him grow up. He was this skinny, underfed teen when I met him, and he's blossomed. The kid is one of the sweetest guys I know. He was so terrified and scared and brave when he was taken by Abel Gideon, and I still remember him shaking like a leaf after he had to defend Hannibal and himself against the human gut strings guy. Budge. Against a real, actual psychopath. He's a good kid. Warm, generous, genuinely *good*. He's not superficially charming or arrogant. He's nice, in a shy and introverted way. There is no way Will is involved with this crap."

Miriam Lass says, "I suppose Jack will echo your sentiments?"

"Yes, he will," says Beverly loudly. "He knew Will even before Hannibal did, before any of us. You have nothing but wild guesses. I can't stop you from going to him, but he'll want evidence. Find evidence before you go to him."

The newer agent scowls and takes off. Beverly runs a hand through her hair, and wishes she had Jimmy's tact. Then again, as her spirit animal Cordelia Chase said, *tact is just not saying*

true stuff, and Beverly hates to mince about watching words. If Lass isn't able to take her advice, it's her loss.

*****

Hannibal smiles genially at Mr Rossall, who has just confided in Hannibal that he is leaving a substantial portion in his will to the psychiatrist for his devoted care throughout these past few years. The aluminum magnate has only a son who is set on frittering away his inheritance.

"Will be a good shock that he won't have as much as he thinks," says Donald Rossall viciously. He puts aside the sketches from Hannibal's folio on the desk.

"You still have time to educate him," he reminds Mr Rossall quietly. "After all, he bears the Rossall name."

Mr Rossall snorts. "Nothing I say will get through his thick skull. Besides, you are more deserving of the money than he. All those times you drove out to check on me after my wife's suicide... I owe you a great debt, Dr Lecter."

Hannibal inclines his head. "I only did what any doctor will do."

"My regular doctor sends me a Christmas card via his secretary. It's all set, Dr Lecter," says Donald Rossall, his veined hands curling into fists briefly. At seventy-four, he is still healthy, but he is starting to fade. "Ironclad."

"I hope it will not be read for some time yet," says the doctor, before glancing at his watch. Will is going to show up soon. "I will see you next week?"

"Same time," says Mr Rossall. He hesitates at the door. "My son wanted me to stop seeing you, you know, after he found out about your boyfriend. Says you're preying on the young."

Hannibal looks contrite. "Will is very much younger than I am, yes."

"But he is good to you?"

"Yes, very much so."

Mr Rossall nods slightly. "He is blessed to have you. My son may put on airs and morals, but he's the one with two affairs and a broken marriage."

Hannibal smiles more widely. "I am doubly blessed to have him. Perhaps your son just needs to find the right person to love." He bids Mr Rossall goodnight, and returns to sort out his notes.

Some deft mental calculations tell him that he is financially secure for the rest of his life, and Mr Rossall's contribution will aid in making sure Will's life after Hannibal will be very comfortable. It's not a pleasing consideration to have to make, but Hannibal is nothing if not thorough. Whatever happens, Will is going to want for nothing. The drawings will need to be put in order, he thinks with a smidgen of annoyance, but it is not of major importance. They

are old sketches from before Will Graham. His drawings since have been almost entirely preoccupied with his lover, though not always obvious: one of Hannibal's personal favorite is a white pebble, sitting in the scarred palm of a slender hand.

His cell phone buzzes. He leaves the drawings aside for the moment as he talks a patient through yet another episode, wondering all the while if it will be neater to just let him swallow a bullet.

*****

Will parks his Toyota just outside the building, and catches sight of Miriam Lass walking down the street.

"Hi," he says when she looks up. "Evening stroll?"

The agent manages a semi-sincere smile. "Oh, no, I came to look for Dr Lecter. As are you, I suppose?"

"I wanted to meet up with him at the office. Did you park far?"

"Oh no, I took a cab, dropped just there. My car's out of commission at the moment, something wrong with the suspension." She follows Will up the few steps. "I have some questions to ask Dr Lecter. I hope you don't mind if I take up some of his time? I assume you two have plans."

Will casts a small smile in her direction. "It's all right, I have access to him every day. Besides, you're FBI, your stuff is priority. Come on, his last appointment would have just left."

"You know his schedule?"

"By heart. I sometimes help him confirm the appointments for the week while he cooks dinner." Will raps on the door in case Mr Rossall hasn't left. "That's all I have access to, of course. He keeps his patients' records in the office."

Hannibal opens the door and appears surprised. "Miss Lass. I wasn't expecting you."

She looks vaguely apologetic. "Sorry, I forgot to call. I was too engrossed in reviewing a file. Um, I came to compare notes on the Ripper cases?"

"Ah, yes, we talked about that." Hannibal hangs up Will's coat and takes Miriam's from her. "Please, have a seat. But Will should perhaps not be privy to our discussion?"

Will rolls his eyes theatrically. "I'll be making tea and coffee." He turns to the blonde agent. "Coffee or tea? And how do you like it?"

"Coffee, black, please," she says with a thin smile.

*****

Will is out of the room before Miriam Lass gets to the point of her visit. "Dr Lecter, did you, at any point, discuss the Doll Maker case with Will Graham or Matthew Brown?"

"Only what has been released to the news," says Hannibal calmly, but the gears in his brain are turning rapidly. "I sought to ease the tension Matthew carried, though with little result. Please, have a seat."

"I won't take long, Dr Lecter," Miriam Lass says, and then fishes out a document from a manila folder. "Anyway, back to the Ripper cases. There was this one man, the eighth victim of the Ripper that we know of, who had been treated by you once. Jeremy Olmstead."

"Treated by me?"

"In ER. He was in A&E for an arrow injury. You were on duty that night, though the name on the sheet was another doctor's."

Hannibal frowns faintly. "I have little memory of the name," he says after some time pretending to ponder. He knows exactly which one - Olmstead was killed about eight months before Jack Crawford introduced Will Graham into his life. He started consulting for the FBI just after the Wound Man case, and it had been great fun profiling himself - though the description he offered Jack at the time was skewed. He also knows Miriam Lass is fishing for something, either about Will or Matthew, and that she is asking for patient information she has no warrant for.

There is an angle the agent is trying to build.

It is the shrill whistle of his kettle coming from behind the wall that reminds Hannibal he has to play the show out. He takes the document Lass is holding, and lets his eyes scan over it, also noting the delightful tableau he left for the FBI then. "The arrow... ah, I think I know when. I kept detailed records at the time and they should be in the library upstairs. Would you like them?"

"Yes, certainly."

Hannibal heads towards the ladder just as Will is coming into the room. Miriam Lass swiftly hides the document that she has just showed Hannibal. The younger man merely lets his amusement show around his eyes but Hannibal gives him a minute shake of his head.

"Hannibal does that whole 'for my eyes only' thing too," he tells Lass, but that is a blatant lie. "He knows I hate seeing all that stuff. Reminds me of my dad's murder."

Hannibal and Will love to pore over crime scene photos together. Will can sometimes picture himself the killer, and occasionally talks Hannibal through the entire process. It is remarkable how easily Will can slip into other people's skins.

As a psychiatrist, Hannibal is fascinated with the ease with which Will empathizes with the killers rather than the victims; as a lover, he is slightly concerned with the shadows Will draws into himself; as a serial killer and cannibal, he resents the other killers taking up space in his beloved's mind, and he knows he's shown off for Will on their few hunts together.

He goes up the ladder and silently removes his shoes, trusting Will to keep the agent distracted.

*****

As he sets down the drinks, Will sees Miriam Lass studying the detailed drawings Hannibal has carelessly left out on the desk. Probably Mr Rossall has been looking through them again; the old man does so like Hannibal's architectural studies and reworkings from old texts. Will prefers Hannibal's sketches of the dogs, and is privately flattered by the many drawings the doctor has made of Will himself.

Then the agent freezes very slightly when she sees the drawing of the Wound Man. If Will hasn't been watching her, he would have missed it. There's something about the drawing that has alerted her to Hannibal's true nature - perhaps it is reminiscent of one of Hannibal's earlier installations.

Will knows that, in that instant, Lass has to die.

From the corner of his eye he notices Hannibal descending the ladder soundlessly. Will pads around the table to the agent's side and peers at the pencil drawings, feigning naivete and ignorance.

"They're really good, aren't they? His drawings won him a scholarship." He exhales a huff of proud amusement. "I just wish he'll draw landscapes too. Or paint."

Miriam Lass whispers, "You have to leave. Now."

"Why?" asks Will. "Is your case super classified?"

"Because-"

Stepping aside, Will watches Hannibal grasp the woman by her slender neck and drag her away from the furniture. The young man rests his hips against the desk and links his fingers in his lap while his lover strangles Lass with serene determination. He lets his gaze meet Lass's even as she fades from consciousness. The calmness that Hannibal wears around him is that of a tiger stalking through the forests; Will feels himself sinking gladly into it. Hannibal rests his cheek on her golden hair as her kicks become more and more feeble.

Soon she is out cold.

Will smiles slowly. "I love watching you work."

Hannibal lays her out on the floor before he gets his kit. "Did she drive?"

"She took a cab. How do you want this done?"

Hannibal frowns faintly. "I would want to honor her for managing to find me, but she would have notes, and I will need time to set the stage."

"So we keep her for now," says Will, striding over to give his lover a hard kiss, all teeth and tongue and *hunger*. "I'm sure you can orchestrate something wonderful."

*****

An injection keeps Lass unconscious and breathing, and Will has tied her up expertly until they have decided what to do with her. In the meantime, they are seated in the leather armchairs facing each other, as though Will was really a patient. Hannibal thinks he would have liked conversations like this were they not lovers - Will has an intricate mind, sharp enough to follow where Hannibal led, and in another life, perhaps, they would have been perfectly matched as opponents. Though to what end that particular version of them would come to is debatable.

"I do feel concerned for our relationship if - when - i go back to school," says the young man, his fingers tapping on the arms of the chair, though he seems unaware that he is doing it. "I feel like I'm stepping back in time even though I'm actually going into a new phase in life."

"You don't sound excited about it," says Hannibal.

Will's mouth twitches in a small smile and his gaze flickers over Hannibal's face. "I am. I think it'll be good to have a degree for music education under my belt, and it'll give me security. And, as you are well aware, I have a problem with. Feeling secure. I'm also scared I've forgotten how to study. The rigor of lessons and lectures, of assignments. The pressure of... people. And I dread the *idea* of group projects." He sighs and tilts his head. "But more than all that, I fear what you think of my choice. You've not been very forthcoming on my applying to college, Hannibal."

The psychiatrist smiles. "I have had some difficulty trying to articulate my thoughts to myself."

"It's our time, Hannibal, please do share."

"I am pleased that you are furthering your formal education," says Hannibal, "and I am concerned, at the same time, that I will not be enough for you. That there will be someone who is more compatible with you in age and temperament and is not burdened with my sort of darkness. It is an irrational fear, but it is present."

Will straightens in his chair. "I love you."

"I know that. I also know I am a quarter of a century older than you. Fear is not always rational or logical."

"You could be seventy when I met you and I would still have loved you." The young man cocks his head and grins. "Though the sex wouldn't have been quite as fun as it has been." The grin disappears. "What can I do to help you deal with your reservations?"

Hannibal shakes his head. "Remain as you are, mon amour. Time will help me adjust."

With a sigh, Will stands and moves over to his lover, his hand cupping Hannibal's jaw to tilt his face up. Pressing a soft kiss to Hannibal's mouth, Will murmurs, "I will always choose you over all things."

Hannibal wraps an arm around Will's slim waist and tugs him close. "Always?"

"I'm not doing the rom-com cliche," says Will with a laugh. He sits leans down and kisses Hannibal more thoroughly. His fingers thread into Hannibal's fine hair and tugs gently, before insinuating himself into the other man's lap. "What are we going to do about the Ripper?"

"Jack Crawford will never stop investigating him," says Hannibal on an exhalation. "He wouldn't be Jack otherwise."

"You had someone in mind to take the fall."

"I do, but it will take time to set events in motion," says the older man, nuzzling into the softness under Will's chin. "What do you think of Chilton?"

Will hums Bach's Musette in D Major before he answers. "He is odious. I've not forgotten his first remarks to me. Insinuating you were a cradle-robber." His eyes narrow. "And he bullied Matthew into his sessions with Abel Gideon. He may still be doing it. Dangling Mattie as *bait* to get Gideon to talk."

The psychiatrist trails his hand up Will's spine. "Chilton it is then."

"Use Gideon."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows curiously. "Use Gideon?"

"He plagiarized your work," says Will, tracing the sensuous curves of the older man's mouth. "Claiming credit for someone else's work... that is a wrong thing to do."

With a small huff of laughter, Hannibal kisses Will in delight. "You are going to be an absolute terror."

*****

"*Matthew. Can we meet?"*

"Of course," Matthew answers.

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"How is life treating you now that your sister is dead?" Abel Gideon asks Matthew, who ignores him. "Without someone to take care of, you must have *plenty* of free time to do what you did not have the chance to do before."

Chung gives Gideon a shake, as though to remind him to behave, but the man doesn't acknowledge the implicit admonishment. The session is over and Gideon is always more abrasive after being fired questions from Chilton for an hour.

"You must find your time off so empty," Gideon continues. "My wife's cousin had a child with Down's Syndrome. The brat was so annoying, always making a mess everywhere he went. I'd have been more than happy to slit his throat, but that cousin and her brat didn't come to that dinner."

Matthew's hands clench.

The small motion doesn't go unnoticed; Gideon leers at the nurse and says, "You have to feel a sense of relief, not to have to be taking care of a retard of a sister for the rest of your life."

Matthew doesn't see red nor does he feel a surge of rage. Instead, his vision goes white around the edges. Yanking Gideon from Chung's hold, he knees the patient in his gut, and then shoves him over the concrete banister to watch him fall on the steel cage below where Barney is drinking coffee.

Chung tugs Matthew away from the banister. "Brown, what the hell...?"

"Esther wasn't retarded," Matthew says evenly, his voice nearly a monotone. "She was special."

The orderly licks his lips and peers over the banister again. Barney has called for help to get Gideon off the cage. "It was an accident. He struggled to grab you and toppled over and fell."

Evidently, Chung feels indebted to Matthew for saving him before. Matthew nods, still feeling cold and detached. He is strangely calm about what he has just done, but he knows the rage will come later. He feels like he is standing on the edge of a shoreline and the waters around him are deep and full of bloodied mystery.

Chung drags Matthew with him downstairs, and garbles the story to anyone who asks. They are loading Gideon onto a gurney and a few staff members mutter that Gideon has had it coming for a long time. No one has forgiven him for the murders of their colleagues. Some pat Matthew on the back and say that it's not his fault.

Yet it is entirely his calculated decision.

*****

Last night's conversation with Will and Dr Lecter was surreal.

"You've guessed at Hannibal's true nature," says Will.

"We are like you, aren't we?" Matthew asks the older man.

Will smiles like a fox. "There is no one like him. But we are alike, you and I, and he has chosen to trust you."

"What are you trusting me with?"

Dr Lecter tilts his head and regards Matthew with those unnervingly burgundy eyes. "Have you heard of the Chesapeake Ripper?"

"...Yes." A pause, and then Matthew covers his mouth. "Oh my God."

"Will trusts you," says Dr Lecter placidly. "And I trust him."

With a smile, Will covers Matthew's hand. "If you betray him, I will eat you."

Matthew turns his palm over and holds his friend's hand. "What do you need me to do?"

*****

He has yet to fully comprehend why they chose to take him into their confidence. Even now Matthew has some difficulty reconciling the man who adored his bubbly and loving sister and the man who willingly maimed a mentally-ill patient under the guise of provocation.

This is Will's idea. If Matthew still has any doubts that his best friend is crazy, they have been removed. But it's a crazy Matthew can understand, because he is the same, the relentless *need* to make sure the people they loved only received the good things in life. There is no one else in the world now that Matthew can provide for, other than Will; the same protective urges that let Matthew commit to taking care of Esther are still present, and Will is *his* to care for now.

He may lose his job or be charged for this. It will be worth it, though. He has endured Gideon long enough.

Dr Lecter has promised to set things right. He'll take Gideon away, and remove Chilton from his administrative role. He'll change things - the way a forest fire razes everything to the ground to make way for new growth.

Matthew can't wait.

*****

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"God, please-" Will reaches up to grab a handful of pillow and the other hand claws blindly at the sheets. His moans become breathier and shorter as Hannibal thrusts more rapidly into him. The older man bends over his lover, sucking marks over Will's sweat-slicked chest and testing his teeth on dark nipples. Will whines and tilts his hips up farther, his legs tightening around Hannibal. "Come on, Hann- Hannibal, please, harder-"

The psychiatrist wraps a hand around Will's erection, jerking in time to his thrusts. His lips lock on the crook of Will's neck. The younger man's moans take on a feverish pitch, suddenly breaking off into a hitched gasp. His back bows off the bed, pressing his torso up into Hannibal's as though trying to melt into him. Warm slickness coats Hannibal's hand and that

sensation as well as the familiar scent of Will's enjoyment shoves Hannibal over into his own climax.

As his heart rate slows, Hannibal marvels at his own life. He has done nothing and everything to deserve Will Graham; how long will he get to keep him? He lets himself wallow for a moment, licking the perspiration from Will's neck and collarbones, breathing in their mingled scents.

Will mildly protests the clean-up, and wiggles provocatively when Hannibal slips out of him. "You want me to keep myself warm for you?"

"I'd love that," says Hannibal, licking and biting over Will's lower lip. Reluctantly, he slides out of bed and stretches for Will's lascivious appreciation. "However I may take quite some time to retrieve our guest."

Will sits up and scrubs the back of his head. His curls stick out in a fluffy mess. "Are you sure you don't want me to help?"

"I'll be fine, mon rêve," the psychiatrist says. "Don't shower."

"Mmm. Never thought I'll hear you say that." They share a tender kiss again, before Hannibal steps into the bathroom to clean up.

It's going to be a long night.

Chapter End Notes

Bach's Musette in D Major
thank you all for the comments, i do read every single one and appreciate them even if i don't always reply!

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Beverly holds up the umbrella while Jack buzzes the door bell insistently. Normally she'll feel bad for Hannibal that her boss is seeking him out on a rainy Sunday morning, but today she is in no mood to sympathize with anyone. Not after what they saw in the hospital. She's been trying to reach Miriam Lass with no luck. Jimmy and Brian have already placed bets on how long the chewing out is going to be when Jack finally gets hold of the errant agent; they're now processing the scene.

The door opens to reveal a slightly sleepy-eyed Hannibal wearing a dressing gown over pajama pants and no shirt. Beverly wishes she could snap a picture without being unprofessional, because Alana will totally drool over her mentor in this outfit.

"Jack, Beverly. Good morning. I wasn't expecting you." The doctor steps aside and welcomes them into his house. "I don't suppose your visit is to have breakfast with us."

"I won't say no to coffee," says Beverly, ignoring the dark expression on Jack's face.

Jack stands in the foyer, hands in his pockets. He looks like a thundercloud. "There was a murder and an abduction last night. I tried calling, but I kept getting the voice mail."

Hannibal pauses mid-step to the kitchen. "I left my phone on vibrate-" He's interrupted by a petulant drawl from the stairs.

"Hannibal, you know I hate waking alone- Oh. Hi." Will halts as he steps into view. *And what a view,* Beverly thinks with a giggle: Will's curly hair is in a mess that can only be due to vigorous sex, while his bare torso reveals the scar from his operation, but more importantly, a number of dark suck marks and also dried ejaculate. His face turns scarlet with incredible speed and he wraps his arms about his middle. Beverly has to hide her amusement - the young man is mortified, and rightly so, given his state. "I wasn't expecting guests. FBI agents. Hi. Uh, Mr Crawford. Bev. Um. I should... I'll be down. Again. Later. In, um. Clothes."

The doctor looks similarly embarrassed, the tops of his cheeks and ears pink. It was a sight which Beverly has never witnessed before and again she wishes she dared to take a photo. "I apologize. We had a rather late night."

"I'll say," Beverly quips.

Jack's expression has not shifted at all. "Dr Lecter. There's been a murder. It looks like the Ripper is back. We need you."

Hannibal blinks twice, three times. It'd have been funny, Beverly muses, except that it is the Chesapeake Ripper returning to form.

The psychiatrist tightens the belt around his robe. "Please, have a seat in the kitchen. I'll get dressed."

*****

Beverly usually enjoys coffee at the doctor's home. However, today is not a day to sip and savor.

Will has regained his composure by the time he returns to the group. Hannibal has offered coffee to the agents and has another set aside for Will, but none of them are enjoying their drinks. Jack briefly outlines the situation at the hospital. On hearing that Abel Gideon is gone, Will turns pale and his hand slide over to grasp Hannibal's fingers. "He's... Is he working with the Ripper? Could he come again, to our home?" He looks at Hannibal beseechingly.

"Gideon is in no shape to do anything," says Jack. "He fell and broke his back late yesterday, after a session with Dr Chilton. Apparently he tried grabbing your friend, Matthew Brown, and in the ensuing struggle Gideon toppled over the banister and fell on a steel cage."

"Oh god." Will swallows and his eyes dart from Beverly to Jack Crawford. "Is - is Matthew okay?"

"Unhurt. It happened really fast, according to the orderly with them, and Matthew reacted on instinct. Gideon lost his balance subsequently and, without his hands free to brace himself, he fell," says Beverly. She can imagine what Lass will say when she hears what happened to Gideon; she'll probably claim it's all a huge conspiracy or something. She sees Will still holding Hannibal's fingers, as though he's trying not to clutch at the older man.

Will looks at Hannibal and says, "I... Hannibal, can we talk? Sorry Bev, Mr Crawford, I just need to... I'll be in the study."

Hannibal clears his throat. "Please allow us a moment. I will be there promptly." He pads after Will.

*****

It isn't intentional that the two agents overhear parts of the conversation. Beverly pauses in the middle of pulling on her coat; Jack glances at her, and then at the door.

"...no guarantee that you won't be targeted. The last time, Gideon nearly shot you!" Will says adamantly. He sounds scared and indignant.

Hannibal does not shout, but his voice carries in the silence of the house through the barely open door to the study. "...Will, this isn't about Gideon, this is the Ripper-"

"Not a good thing, moving from a psychopathic killer who's been caught before to hunting one that has never been caught- damn it, Hannibal, shut the fucking door."

Jack puts on his hat and opens the front door to leave. Beverly feels bad for Will; the young man sounds really terrified for Hannibal. She understands, because Alana sometimes listens

to her describing her cases with the same sort of fearful anger. Somewhat guilty that they have inadvertently eavesdropped on what should have been a private discussion, Beverly feels vindicated nonetheless in her assessment of Will.

In her years of studying criminals and killers, Beverly has learned that most of them can only pretend normalcy in front of people. Behind closed doors, they reveal their true selves. They don't have loyal friends and they don't know how to care for others. Those socially maladjusted people are manipulative, shallow, frequently abusive either physically or emotionally, and most of them have an elevated sense of self. Hannibal is confident, not arrogant; Will is one of the most modest persons she knows. Hannibal may be incredibly polished and sophisticated and Will a bashful charmer in company, but in their private lives, they are just like any other regular couple.

And regular people don't kill and display victims.

Jack starts the car without a word. Beverly wisely holds her tongue on the necessity of coming all the way to Hannibal's house instead of sending a message. It's obvious that Jack wants to have Hannibal on the scene as soon as possible, but he also wants to gauge the psychiatrist's reactions. Perhaps Miriam got to him already. However, whatever doubt the man entertains has to have been swept away by Will's disheveled state and his genuine fear and worry upon hearing that Gideon has escaped.

Beverly knows the glimmerings of her own apprehension are already gone. She knows what she trusts: evidence. And all the evidence she has at hand right now indicates that Will and Hannibal are innocent. By extension, Matthew Brown is unlikely to be the one who tortured and killed Jordan Greene, since he was with his best friend Will for the entirety of his ordeal and grief over his sister.

"Did you get Lass?" Jack asks when they pull to a stop in the hospital's parking lot.

"Not yet. Do you want me to go look for her?"

"Go to her home. I want her here," says Jack. "She's been looking into the past cases. At this point, any insight will help."

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Hannibal walks into the ward, escorted by a member of the police, and pulls on the gloves Zeller offers. Once he's seen the scene, he remarks, "Striking return to form."

"The Ripper Returns." Zeller exhales. "If Lounds was still alive, that's probably what she'll run with."

The guard that Hannibal murdered last night was sitting up in Gideon's place, but his intestines were spilled out across the bedding in a neat zigzag pattern. The kidneys were laid out next to his knees, with one sliced finely, and the liver lay atop the guard's feet. His lungs were cradled in his elbows, and his heart lay in his lap. The final touch is the tongue he has pulled through the guard's throat.

"The Colombian necktie is in mimicry of what Gideon did to Dr Carruthers," says Jack. "The rest I cannot begin to hypothesize."

"Order and sequence," says Hannibal, moving to the end of the bed. "The precision of the layout is in direct rebuke of the mess he left behind him. I think the Ripper wants to put certain matters back in order, Jack."

Jack narrows his eyes. "The kidneys?"

"Gideon destroyed one of Dr Chilton's kidneys. I suppose the Ripper finds it amusing to do this too. We do know that Gideon isn't the Ripper, but he's claimed to be the Ripper."

With a small sigh, Jack says, "If the Ripper only wanted to reclaim his name, why now? It's been four years since Freddie Lounds."

Price returns with more sample envelopes. "Or why it isn't Gideon here, instead. It's not like he couldn't kill Gideon easily. The man broke his T4 vertebrae, he's not going to put up a fight."

"Maybe the Ripper wants to talk to him, teach him a lesson," says Zeller with a humorless smile.

Hannibal carefully pulls on the lower lip of the dead guard to open his mouth. "Agent Zeller?"

"I see it," says the wiry man, and tweezes the long hairs out of the guard's mouth. "Red hair."

"I will hazard a guess to say those belong tp the late Freddie Lounds," Hannibal remarks.

"I suspect you're right." Jack looks grimmer than before. "What do you suggest we do next, doctor?"

"The Ripper is always careful," says Hannibal gravely. "Something stayed his hand for four years, however, and like any other craft, surgery requires practice."

"You think he may have made a mistake?"

"I think something provoked him into acting, and he may have committed an error."

"Let's hope," says Price, almost cheerfully.

The laboratory specialists' morbid optimism is perfectly suited to this spectacle, though they are unaware of it; already Hannibal can feel anticipation wind up in his gut. He does wonder what Beverly will say when she sees what lies in store at Miriam Lass's home. He decides to wait a little longer until Beverly phones Jack. In the meantime, he accosts Zeller and asks about the injuries Gideon sustained. The agent is more than happy to share, and even snags a junior agent to retrieve Gideon's medical charts for the two doctors to pore over.

*****

"Beverly," Jack says when he answers his phone. Then his entire demeanor shifts from casual alertness to wary disbelief. "You found *what*?"

Hannibal doesn't even pause in his conversation with Price about the layout of the guard's innards.

*****

Beverly waits in the hallway, the door to the apartment ajar. When she sees Jack, she folds her arms. "I don't know what to think of this."

This being two walls in Miriam's apartment plastered from floor to ceiling of Ripper crime scene photos and reports, her scrawled notes all over each one, and the thick stack of reference materials on her desk planted facing the larger wall. There are sheets of lined paper with line after line of Miriam's thoughts and suspicions.

"She came to me with some conjecture about Matthew Brown that was completely groundless last Friday. I told her to get actual proof before going to you... Well. I guess she has been looking for evidence for a little too long," says Beverly quietly. "Jack, I'm not the type to infer or intuit, but this - this whole thing screams obsession to me."

"I asked her to look into the cases," says Jack. His voice is so devoid of emotion that Beverly knows he's in shock at what he's seeing. "I wasn't... I didn't expect this."

"She was here yesterday at least. There's a bowl of ramen in the sink." Off her boss's questioning look, Beverly adds a tad defensively, "College taught me a lot about telling time by junk food, Jack."

The two of them stare at the display. Finally, Jack instructs, "Find her. I want to talk with her before I let her come into contact with the current case."

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Hannibal barely contains his satisfaction throughout the rest of the day as he goes home and completes his preparations for the evening, switching out the centerpieces while Will walks the dogs with Matthew. The two young men have driven out to the park for the rest of the afternoon to exercise Winston and Buster. The psychiatrist is glad of the solitude. He will not have much of it over the next few days.

His lover must have created a masterpiece of a display in Miriam's home yesterday. The young woman was very obliging once the drugs were administered and she was deep into the hypnotic state. Page after page after page of her suspicions and thoughts scrawled out with incredible detail gave Will more than enough to work with. They have scoured everything she wrote. Every time she used Hannibal's or Will's names in something mildly incriminating, Hannibal copied out with replacements - though not all were removed. A complete absence will look just as suspicious.

If Jack Crawford stays true to form, he will want to percolate over what he's seen for a while, and have someone - probably Beverly - track down Miriam for the rest of the day. Then he will come to Hannibal tomorrow and ask for his input. The chase will start only then.

Hannibal can't wait.

At the moment he is working the clay for dinner. Mozart's *Piano Sonata in A Major* provides accompaniment to his practiced moves. His fingers knead together the seams, the clay staining his skin dark red like dried blood. The tactile delight of the material yielding to his manipulations helps erase some of the tiredness from the past two nights.

He has some lingering reservations about letting Matthew into the secret he and Will share, but his lover seems convinced of his best friend's reliability and discretion. Hannibal himself is curious, too. Once Matthew sees the complete truth of the Ripper, will he draw nearer or flee?

The doctor has no doubt that Will meant every syllable of his promise to kill Matthew if the latter betrays them. It brings a sweet flutter to Hannibal's heart to think of Will being protective; the young man is maturing in a manner that the doctor would never have guessed four years ago. The darkness that Hannibal glimpsed back then now cloaks Will like raven feathers. In time, the young man will be even deadlier than Hannibal. An avenging angel who will judge those unworthy of life, and sentence them accordingly.

And to think Hannibal gets to cherish and adore the dark perfection that is Will Graham.

He is filled with anticipation at the thought of marrying this young man. The ring is in his office drawer now. Just slightly less than a week to their anniversary, and he can call Will his fiancé. Alana has texted him earlier to confirm the delivery of the flowers, the reservation of the Red Juniper for the evening, as well as the booking of the Christmas trip to London.

To thank her, he's sent her a list of caterers that have not disappointed him, as well as the outline and a summary of the readings he has done for the article they are writing together.

A round of familiar barking signals Matthew and Will's return with the dogs. Hannibal glances out the window to the backyard, and smiles at the two young men. In a different life they would have been perfect for each other, and a casual observer may even mistake them to be lovers. The doctor feels a faint whisper of jealousy and brushes it aside. Will knows to whom he belongs, and Hannibal trusts Will completely.

*****

"I'm praying it won't rain, that's all," says Will, unclipping the leash. "Go on then, Winston, get your drink."

"I can't guarantee the weather, but I can take the dogs for the day," Matthew offers.

Will brightens. "That'd be fantastic! You really don't mind?"

"Nah," says Matthew with a shrug. "I'll come by Thursday night to pick up the dogs, and you get all Friday to do w-whatever you need to do. Or, you know, to do Dr Lecter."

"Shut the fuck up," says Will, blushing. He bites his upper lip in a shy smile and stares at his feet. "I can't believe it. Friday. God, Mattie, I feel like I'm gonna burst."

"But you'll have to meet Delia with me this Tuesday first. I'll pick you up from work after my shift ends, and we'll head down to the studio. It's about half an hour from your workshop, I think. I'm gonna discuss my first tattoos." The nurse ruffles his friend's curls. Under a show of scraping mud from his shoes, he asks in a low whisper, "Where's the you-know-what?"

"In my work duffel in my car," answers Will, making sure he's not facing the house. "Not that he'll go looking but I'm kinda paranoid he'll see it before Friday."

Buster comes yipping at Will's ankle and the young man gives the wily dog a good scratch around his ears before smacking him on his rump fondly. When he straightens, Will's gaze has hardened into something darker, more dangerous. The change makes a shiver run down Matthew's spine. How can Will Graham be both the besotted lover and the stone-cold murderer at the same time?

"I know we asked you to stay for dinner," Will says. "You don't have to. If you do stay for dinner, whatever you witness inside the house stays in the house. I've also asked Hannibal to prepare a different dish for you - don't feel obliged to eat what we're having."

Matthew rolls his eyes. "I threw a patient onto a steel cage for you, Will, I don't think there's a lot of things that I w-on't do when it comes to you and Dr Lecter."

"Mattie, I'm serious. You don't have to stay, but if you do, you will *never* talk about what happens at dinner tonight." Will's gloved hand is cold against Matthew's cheek and skates down to press lightly against his Adam's apple. "I love you like a brother, but Hannibal is mine, and I am his."

The two young men stare at each other, holding the gaze, and then Matthew smiles, slow and cunning. "I will love to have dinner here tonight. I'm sure it'll be delicious."

*****

Will knows Hannibal has seen his and Matthew's exchange on the back porch and is pretending to be perfectly calm and not affected at all. With a small smile, he goes to his older lover and slides an arm around Hannibal's trim waist. Matthew excuses himself to go to the study - the two are going to watch a DVD while Hannibal putters around in the kitchen.

"Hey there," Will murmurs into the softness behind Hannibal's ear.

Hannibal barely turns his head, but the tension bleeds out of his shoulders and features. "Hey yourself," he returns, and waits for Will to kiss his cheek. "Is Matthew staying for dinner?"

Will nuzzles against the doctor. "Mm-hmm." After a pause, he adds, "Do you really think he'll have what we're having?"

"If we are to trust him with the Chesapeake Ripper, we have to trust him fully." Hannibal catches Will's right hand and presses his mouth to the knuckles. "Are you worried he'll reject you?"

"We are cannibals," Will points out. "Most people will consider that repulsive and gross. It took me, what, more than a year before I'd share in the meat?"

"Eleven months, mon amour." The doctor kisses his boyfriend again, and says, "Matthew loves you. He may not eat it, but he won't reject you nor the relationship you two have built."

The younger man rests his chin on Hannibal's shoulder. "You're not feeling threatened, are you? I swear we're just friends, and we're not going to make out while watching *Eastern Promises* later."

Hannibal nips Will's fingertips in warning. "You are a terrible, terrible mongoose, Will Graham. What's to be done about that?"

Wearing an innocent look, Will whispers a suggestion into the psychiatrist's ear.

"You tease, but I will do precisely that tonight. Now leave me to cook in peace." Hannibal accepts one more kiss from his grinning lover, and returns to his preparations. The marrow bone will need careful handling. Will grabs a bag of apple chips from his snack stash and dashes out before his boyfriend can admonish him about junk food. Hannibal rolls his eyes in exasperation - he just hopes Will won't spoil his appetite.

*****

"Viggo is really hot," Will muses aloud. They are nestled together on the chaise longue, Will leaning against Matthew's chest and the laptop balanced on the younger man's lap. "Just look at those cheekbones."

"He looks a bit like Dr Lecter," says Matthew. One arm is slung over the back of the chaise, the other is helping to keep the laptop steady. Will's own hands are holding a bag of apple chips.

The younger man tilts his head, unaware that his curls tickle Matthew's nose. "Mmmmaybe? Perhaps the sharp features." He munches on a chip, and then puts one against Matthew's mouth without even looking. The latter eats it from Will's hand.

This is perfectly lovely, the nurse thinks, and completely misleading. It's very cozy and domestic. If he hadn't already come to terms with the fact that Will Graham will forever be his unrequited love, he would have felt as though Will is leading him on. As it is, Matthew feels like he's the human embodiment of a dog that Will considers part of his pack. He says as much while they watch Kiril watching Viggo's character Nikolai fuck a girl.

Will shifts and winces when his elbow jabs his best friend. "You're not my dog."

"Given how you feed me, and shelter me, and use me as a cushion, and get me to do tricks for you..."

"Are you implying I should reward you with scratches behind the ear or belly rubs?" Will grins and settles again, squirming a little to get more comfortable. "Maybe I should get you a collar and a little dog tag. Walk you every day."

Matthew tugs on one dark brown curl. "You keep your kinky bedroom shit to yourself and Dr Lecter."

"That's not our kink, asshole."

"Please don't tell me it's the whole d-addy thing."

"No! Ew," says Will, sounding disgusted. "Everyone assumes that. Why does everyone assume that?"

Matthew hums, his attention mostly on the movie. "Because he's a lot older?"

Will visibly shudders. "I may have daddy issues, but Hannibal is definitely not a father figure to me."

"Thank God, that'd be really gross."

Passing another apple chip to Matthew, Will grouses, "When you have a girlfriend, I'm definitely going to ask all these invasive personal questions."

"You'd have to let me keep a girlfriend first," says Matthew. Then he squints at the screen. "Wh-at just happened?"

*****

When dinner is ready, Hannibal peeks into the study to see that his boyfriend is nestled in Matthew's arms, and again he feels that mild twinge of jealousy. Ignoring it, he says, "Dinner is about to be served, Will, Matthew. I hope you haven't ruined your appetite with those chips."

Will pauses the show and sets the laptop on the floor. "Alright. Do you need help setting the table?"

"It's already done, mongoose."

Groaning as Will gets off the chaise longue, Matthew stretches and winces. "Thanks, Dr Lecter. By the way, Will needs to eat less. He's getting really heavy."

Hannibal has to smile while his lover comes to him and slides an arm around his waist. "If you didn't want to be a cushion you could have said something," Will points out reasonably, and then plants a kiss on Hannibal's cheek. "Come on, we shouldn't keep a guest waiting."

*****

Matthew has not thought about what to expect, but seeing Abel Gideon sitting at the table as though he has been invited to dinner too is quite startling.

"Matthew Brown, how lovely," says Gideon. He sounds almost like his regular self, but there is a pinched quality to his expression and a tightness in his voice. "I suppose you're joining us for dinner?"

"Of course," answers the nurse. He hesitates briefly; where is he to sit? Gideon has the place at the head of the table since he is in a wheelchair, and Matthew wants nowhere near the man. "Will is my best friend. I can't possibly turn down his invitation."

Will shows Matthew the seat on his left, effectively placing himself between Gideon and Matthew. He pours wine for them, but never says anything. His blue-gray eyes moves from one to the other, apparently amused at some inner monologue, and then he disappears into the kitchen to help Dr Lecter.

Matthew sips carefully. He's not really a wine person, but the drink leaves a bright, cinnamon-y flavor on his tongue. "I heard you broke your back, Dr Gideon. T4 fracture."

The psychopath's smile is as thin and humorless as a razor. "Yes. And that, apparently, led to tonight's meal."

Before either of them can converse further, Dr Lecter emerges with a beautiful platter of a clay mound with hand-crafted leaves and vines atop. Will trails after him with plates holding something - bone with marrow, Matthew realizes - and then takes his seat.

Will leans over to Matthew. "You don't have to eat it."

"Clay-baked roast and canoe-cut marrow," the doctor announces with obvious pride.

His lover raises his glass slightly. "Beautifully done, Hannibal. Don't you think so, Dr Gideon?"

"I love cooking with clay," Dr Lecter tells Gideon. "It creates a more succulent dish." He sets aside the embellishments and cracks the baked clay with a heavy tool on the table.

"And adds a little theatricality to dinner," Will quips.

Matthew just watches, awed. Dr Lecter breaks apart the clay seal, and then unwraps a huge lotus leaf to reveal a large hunk of meat, perfectly roasted in its own juices. The scent makes Matthew's mouth water, but he notices how Gideon is resolutely not looking at the dish.

Dr Lecter addresses Gideon directly. "Shall I carve?"

"I think you already have," says Gideon, his voice sounding strangled.

"Your legs are of no more use to you, as you well know," says Dr Lecter, deftly carving slices of the meat and placing them on Gideon's plate. "This is a far more practical use of those limbs."

All of a sudden, Matthew understands why Will has made the offer of a different dinner dish for him, and why the threats. His eyes fall on the roast meat that Dr Lecter is slicing, and at how Will is smiling lovingly at his boyfriend while accepting the slices, and then on his own

empty plate. The marrow is there too, rich and savory in its aroma. He swallows and his tongue darts out over his lips; he isn't sure how to respond.

"You threw me off the stairs," Gideon drawls, "not knowing what is to happen to me?"

Matthew stares at his plate, and slowly raises his gaze. "No, I didn't know. And now I do."

Dr Lecter regards the young nurse steadily, still holding the carving knife and fork. There is a hint of challenge around the doctor's eyes but there is also warmth and acceptance. "Would you like some?"

"You don't have to if you don't want to," Will reminds his friend again.

The psychiatrist smiles. "The tragedy is not to die, Matthew, but to be wasted."

Gideon will die at Dr Lecter's hands. Regardless of whether I eat him or not, he will die. But before he dies, he will have fulfilled a purpose. There will have been meaning to his death.

Meaning that has been denied my sister.

The last thought decides Matthew.

"The Iroquois used to eat their enemies to gain their strength." Matthew holds Dr Lecter's gaze, and then offers up his empty plate to be filled, like he is accepting a benediction from a primal god in an Italian suit.

Gideon's dark eyes flick from one dining companion to another. "You intend for me to be my own last supper."

"You intended to know the Chesapeake Ripper," says Dr Lecter. "And Matthew has earned our trust and should thus know the truth of the Ripper. Now is a good chance for both of you."

*****

Hannibal can barely restrain his macabre satisfaction as Matthew cuts a mouthful and puts it in his mouth. Neither does the psychiatrist miss the dark, proud glance Will casts at his best friend, and the stiffness of Gideon's shoulders.

Matthew chews slowly and then swallows. "This is delicious, Dr Lecter."

"Thank you, Matthew."

"How does one decline a meal in such circumstances?" Gideon asks. He still has not looked at the roast meat.

"One doesn't," Hannibal informs him bluntly.

Gideon takes a deep breath, and then picks up his fork and knife to cut a single bite of his own leg. Revulsion shines from his eyes and his every move is strained, but he manages to

put that morsel into his mouth and chew. His throat works convulsively like he is about to throw up, but instead he swallows.

"Delicious," he says, almost grimacing with the effort.

"Thank you for providing us with tonight's meal, Dr Gideon. " Hannibal smiles in genuine pleasure.

With a pained smile, Gideon says, "You're welcome."

Chapter End Notes

I'm not kink-shaming, just to be clear. Will is just not into the Daddy kink is all.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Matthew lingers in the study after dinner while Dr Lecter cleans up and Will whisks Abel Gideon to God knows where. The young man is unnervingly calm and collected, though he thinks he ought to feel disgusted and horrified. Yet, his stomach resolutely refuses to clench, his gag reflex is dormant, and he feels utterly at peace with what he has just done. What he knows Will and Dr Lecter do to their victims.

My best friend is a cannibal, he muses, and stifles a small grin. It sounds like the title of a B-movie. *My best friend and his boyfriend are serial-killing cannibals. And now, so am I.*

As though summoned by Matthew's thoughts, Dr Lecter comes into the room on soundless feet. He walks to one of the armchairs and then pauses, watching Matthew move from item to item. Classical music from hidden speakers drips into the silence of the study like crystal beads falling on steel. The younger man can sense the intensity of Dr Lecter's regard, but he waits regardless; he wants to be sure he wants the answer.

"I have one question," says Matthew when the silence has grown too sharp. He finally turns to look at the older man.

Dr Lecter's lips curve slightly. "Go ahead."

"Did you ever give Esther human meat?"

"No."

"Good." The young man inhales deeply and his left hand stills against his thigh. Without averting his gaze, he says, "If you had, I'd have to kill you."

The psychiatrist inclines his head. "And I would deserve and admire your attempt."

Matthew narrows his eyes and studies the older man. Dr Lecter is preternaturally composed and put-together. His mask is complete, so complete that no one will ever suspect him. Eccentric, well-educated, social, sophisticated, loving, almost doting when it comes to Will. Nothing textbook, other than the familiarity with surgical procedures.

However, right here, right now, the lion is in the room.

Matthew licks his lips. "Has Will always known, right from the start?"

"No," answers Dr Lecter. "He found out quickly." There is a pause, almost warm and approving. "You are responding far more calmly than he did."

"I don't feel sorry for the people you killed. Not for Gideon or whoever else," says Matthew quietly. "I don't have the - capacity - to care for people I don't know. Or perhaps I - we -

evolved not to possess that capacity."

"Our empathy, like our love, is given to those whom we judge worthy," the psychiatrist concedes. He sits down in the armchair and continues to watch Matthew. "We choose when to employ our empathy. Our capacity to recognize another as human is dependent on our assessment of their worth. You empathized with your sister, and you empathize with Will. You empathize with me."

"Something we have in common." Matthew's lips curl sardonically. "It's a good thing we aren't actually rivals, Dr Lecter. We are too similar to coexist as equals."

"I concur wholeheartedly."

"My actions are centered on Will's well-being."

"As are mine."

"But you didn't stop." Matthew chews on his upper lip. "You didn't stop killing. You didn't stop eating people."

"I don't indulge as often as I used to," says Dr Lecter. "And I did stop until he allowed me to resume."

Neither of them acknowledge the doctor's admission as to who holds the power in their relationship. Matthew cocks his head and studies the older man. "Were they bad people, those you killed?"

Dr Lecter's smile becomes a touch more enigmatic. "They were rude. The world is better off without them, but don't tell yourself that I do what I do out of a moral imperative."

"You're not a vigilante." Matthew smiles crookedly. "Pity. You'd have been like a real-world Batman."

"My wardrobe will never include latex costumes," says Dr Lecter dryly.

Now Matthew stalks around the room, his gaze never on one thing or place for longer than a few seconds, until he comes to an art piece on the wall that looks almost like rows of kindergarten scribbles. It reminds him of Esther's drawings. "What's this called, please?"

"Taxonomy of Structures from John Hejduk's*Victims*." Dr Lecter laces his fingers over his belly. "John Hejduk was a good teacher. He believed in books and the written word, that teaching is a sociopolitical act. I agree with that sentiment."

Matthew shakes his head. He goes to the other chair facing the older man. "Are you going to be my teacher?"

"Do you want me to be?"

"I don't enjoy killing."

"The act is not about mere enjoyment," says Dr Lecter, not missing a beat. "It is a cogent reminder that we are finite. I find my appreciation of life heightened in the presence of death. It allows me to savor the pleasures and pain and horror that life brings."

"Or the horror and pain you bring to it."

"I do not aim to distress those whom I kill. The meat is tainted when they are afraid."

Matthew grimaces. "How often do you hunt?"

"Once or twice a season. Certainly a lot less than I used to."

"You're very forthcoming."

"I believe Will has a reason to trust you," says the older man evenly. "And I will not doubt his trust in you by being evasive. You asked, I answered."

Having no rebuttal, Matthew finally sits down and faces the doctor. "Why cannibalism?"

Dr Lecter smiles and his eyes gleam. "You put life in your belly and you live."

"Consuming it from those who are making no better use of it." Matthew exhales heavily and slumps against the back of the chair. "Will wants the killer in me. That one single fragment of me. I can't - I *don't* see how this can work. How can I be whole and functional as a person if I'm fragmented? What does he want me to become?"

"You misunderstand Will," says Dr Lecter, calm and placid. "He wants the killer in you, as well as the friend that you are, and the brother you've become. He loves you as you are. He understands you as you have been when your sister was alive. Now he sees a side of you he doesn't understand, and yet empathizes with. He wants to *know* you."

The distance between them feels like fog dissipating. Matthew clenches his hands and then runs a palm over the bottom half of his face.

"I love Will," he confesses, though he knows Dr Lecter is more than aware of this fact. "I love him, and not just as a friend."

"Of course you love him. He is very lovable." The older man tilts his head slightly and the lines around his eyes and mouth deepen. "are you trying to make me jealous?"

"No. I know what he feels about me. And about you, for that matter. I will never... I will n-never be a threat to what you have between you." Matthew ducks his head, embarrassed and defiant. "It's just- I loved Esther, and because she needed a protector and a big brother, I became that for her. I love Will, and I'm scared of what I'll become for him."

"Why are you scared?"

"Being a murderer means risking my life, my freedom," says Matthew flatly. "It's not a sustainable lifestyle."

"No, it isn't," says Dr Lecter. The look in his eyes soften to something nearing affection. "But Will is right - there is a killer in you. I suppose he'd rather you be a competent one."

The nurse purses his lips. "And how did you come to that conclusion, doctor?"

"You don't see killing as a moral debate but in terms of practicality and sustainability. Like you said, we have evolved the need to decide when to exercise the capacity to care."

Matthew swallows and chews reflexively on his upper lip. His voice is perhaps a little too breathy when he asks, "Do I *have* to become? Will he hate me if I stop?"

Dr Lecter inclines his head, regal and leonine. "No. As I told you, he just wants to know all of you. You don't have to do what you don't wish to do. However, there is a need to ensure Will's and my continued freedom, and I will need your help."

"What are you expecting me to do? What are you going to do?"

"I am going to give the FBI a present. I'm going to give them the Chesapeake Ripper."

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Beverly has a bad feeling about Miriam. For the entire day she has not been able to get hold of the newer agent. As she stares at the pictures she took of the walls from Miriam's apartment and the notes that Miriam scribbled haphazardly, the worse the feeling in her stomach grows.

"Bev, do you want some tea?" asks Alana from the door.

The FBI agent shakes her head. "Thanks, Lanie. You know what? I could borrow your eyes."

Alana strides in wearing her doggy print pajamas and fluffy yellow slippers, looking far too adorable for a psychiatrist and professor of her standing. It is sweet and domestic in a manner Beverly is unused to; she steals a kiss before handing the stack over to Alana. The two women study the photos quietly for a few seconds.

"These appear to be very intense examination of the evidence," says Alana hesitantly, "considering these are old cases. You've not managed to get her at all?"

"Nope," says Beverly. She leans back in her chair. "Alana, I'm afraid for her."

Alana looks at the photos again and chews speculatively on her thumb. Beverly tugs the digit out of her fiancee's mouth. The psychiatrist says, "Perhaps you can bring it up with Jack in the morning."

"Heh, well, Jack is on a tightrope at the moment," says Beverly with a rueful chuckle. "He's itching to take down the Ripper, and I don't know how far he's willing to push Miriam before he's satisfied. Oh, this morning? He got me down with him to Hannibal's. Wish I could've

taken a pic. Hannibal answered the door in a robe, and pajama bottoms, and - this is the best part - *no shirt.* You'd have drooled his floor into a swimming pool."

"No I wouldn't," Alana protests, but a telltale blush puts the lie to her words. She bites her lower lip and smiles shyly. "So... um, what did he look like without a shirt?"

Beverly pretends to look dreamy. "Hirsute. Very manly. And some serious muscle. Also, Hannibal has a thing about marking his territory. Will came downstairs in his briefs, looking like he's been fucked *stupid.* Dark pink hickeys *everywhere.* Super hot."

"Oh God, I can't look him in the eye the next time I see him." Alana buries her face in her hands. "Will's like only two thirds your age. And you're a lesbian!"

Beverly shrugs. "I have eyes, and a dirty mind." She pauses and adds, more somberly, "Neither of which will help me find Miriam Lass."

"Could Matthew Brown have taken her? You said she suspected him of killing the Dollmaker."

"Checked him out. He took the overnight shifts for Friday and Saturday, left work around eight on Sunday morning - by which time Lass was already incommunicado." Beverly hisses through her teeth in frustration. "I don't usually listen to my gut, but this time - Lanie, I have a nasty feeling that Miriam Lass found the Ripper."

"Or," says Alana, her mellow voice full of quiet dread, "the Ripper found her."

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The next morning at four, Jack calls the team into his office. On his table is his cell phone. Once they have assembled around the desk in a loose semicircle, Jack plays a message.

"Jack? Jack, it's Miriam. I don't know where I am. I can't - I can't see anything. I was so wrong. I was so wrong! Please…Jack. Please. I don't wanna die like this." The voice is undeniably Miriam Lass, and the terror and anguish in her voice is plain to all of them.

The burly agent turns off the recording. "I got that at 2.46am. I tried tracing the cell but zero luck. Gutierrez tells me that the signal came from my *house*."

Still somewhat groggy, Beverly licks her lower lip. Her entire body is yearning for coffee with a visceral ache. She wishes she isn't the bearer of potentially bad news. "I couldn't get her yesterday."

"When did you see her last?" Jack demands intently.

"Late Friday afternoon. I was finishing up a report on the Ellicott City arson case," Beverly answers, unfazed by her boss's thunderous glare. "She had some theories about the Dollmaker's murder. She said she thought it was Matthew Brown, but the kid had been staying with Will Graham and Dr Lecter from the time his sister went missing until the

funeral. Maybe for a few hours a day he would be alone, but there was no way he could have done... done what was done to Jordan Greene within a day. I told her she was grasping at straws and, well, she left. I don't know where she went to after that."

Price tentatively raises a hand. "Jack, she was also chasing the Ripper leads. Maybe she found him."

It is fascinating how a large man like Jack Crawford can become so still. "He's just returned. She doesn't know that."

"That's what we're assuming," says Zeller, raising an eyebrow.

"Zee-"

"Just saying, Jack. We don't *know*. He kills in threes or fours, but so far only one body's dropped. There'll be two to three more to come, if the pattern holds."

Jack rubs his face with his hands. Clearly the early morning adrenaline dump after hearing that voice message is wearing off. With his fists braced on his desk, he contemplates for a beat, before saying, "Beverly, you follow Lass's trail, work with Gutierrez. Track her down from the time you saw her last, but don't go looking without backup. Zee, Jimmy, we are on the newest Ripper case. Let's hope he made a mistake."

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Chung puts aside his mug of coffee. "You gotta be kidding me. Kid, you don't gotta do this."

"I f-feel like it's my fault, Gideon being taken," says Matthew. He looks miserably at his hands and rubs them on the legs of his pants. "If I hadn't-hadn't lost my temper-"

"Matthew, it ain't your fault," says Chung quietly. He takes another sip of the horrible break room coffee and adds, "Bastard has had it coming for a long time."

Matthew glances up and a corner of his lips curves in sympathetic understanding. "But the guard d-didn't deserve to die. Anyway, you don't have to come w-with me. You were just protecting me, I'll be sure to tell Dr Chilton."

The older man shakes his head. He stands and claps a friendly hand on Matthew's shoulder. "Staff's gotta stick together. Besides, you saved my life from the bastard. I'll be sure to try to save your job."

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Chilton is, as usual, lounging behind his desk, scribbling some notes while listening to the recordings of patients in the hospital. He motions for them to come into the room but does not tell them to sit. Matthew remains standing. He fidgets with his fingers and his gaze skitters over various objects in the office. Chung stands casual and firm beside him, a steadying presence. They wait for the chief of staff to stop.

"Alright, what is this about?" asks Chilton, his dark brown eyes scanning the two of them.

Matthew clears his throat nervously. "I-I-I have to, um, tell you something about Abel Gideon."

That gets Chilton's attention. "What is it?"

"His fall w-wasn't an accident." Matthew allows the lisp and the stutter to surface more severely. It's stressful, after all, confessing to having done something terrible to a patient. "He taunted me and insulted my sister. I lost m-my temper and, uh, and... I forced him over the banister. It w-as my fault he was sent to the hospital and, and the guard was killed, and I didn't m-m-mean to. I just, I saw red and I-I couldn't take it."

Chung lays a comforting hand between Matthew's shoulder blades. "Gideon was deliberately provoking Matthew, Dr Chilton. Kid was goaded too far."

"Be that as it may," says Chilton, "you are a nurse in my hospital, and you are meant to be providing care. Because of you, an innocent man was killed."

The young man's face crumpled in guilt. "I-I didn't know that was going t-to happen. I just, I just w-anted Gideon to sh-shut up."

Chilton exhales heavily, almost theatrically. "Chung, your report was that Gideon fell in the midst of a struggle, correct?"

"Yes sir."

"We'll let that stand." Chilton leans back in his swivel chair and shifts side-to-side in consideration of an idea. "Go back to your duties, Chung. Matthew, take a seat."

Chung exits after another friendly grin at his co-worker. Matthew sits down only after the door is shut.

The administrator studies Matthew like a vegan studying a slab of steak on his plate. Finally, he says, "You're close to Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter, yes?"

"Will's my best friend, sir," answers Matthew honestly. "I frequently have d-dinner with Dr Lecter and Will."

A sour look comes over Chilton's features. "How well do you know Hannibal?"

"Dr Lecter is v-ery kind and generous with his time a-and company. They saw me through... they saw me through a very dark time." Matthew takes a deep breath. "I might've gone crazy if n-not for Will and Dr Lecter."

Chilton chews on the top of a pencil. "Hmm. I wonder if..."

"Sir?"

"Dr Lecter has been working on an article recently with Dr Bloom," says Chilton. "I'd like you to get an early copy of it. Since they are using one of our patients as research material, I'd like to be sure they are not exploiting my hospital nor my patient."

Matthew is reasonably certain that isn't Chilton's reason for wanting to get an early copy. However, he only smiles, playing the part of a dull and simple young man. "Of course. Dr Lecter uses Will's laptop to compile his notes. Would you want me to email it?"

"Oh, no. Use my thumb drive," says Chilton calmly, but the anticipatory gleam in his eyes tells Matthew all he needs to know. He hands over a small gray thumb drive. Matthew takes it by the edges and drops it in his pocket.

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In the bedroom, Will and Hannibal sway gently to Pachelbel's *Canon in D*. The former came home an hour ago ago after a long day of varnishing and, once cleaned up, has sought out the doctor before he leaves for a benefit dinner.

Hannibal is pleasantly surprised by the dancing. He has yet to put on his tie and vest, but Will's needs come first, and right now his lover needs him to be there. "I like this. We should make it a habit."

"We should." Will kisses Hannibal's cheek. "I enjoy having something of our own. Something new."

Hannibal sniffs Will's hair. Most of the stink of varnish has left the young man, but a faint, acrid hint clings stubbornly to him. It doesn't matter; the earthy, woody notes that form Will's signature fragrance soothe the older man.

"While I much prefer not to be under potential scrutiny, I do regret that my days as the Chesapeake Ripper are drawing to an end."

"I like the idea of putting an end to the Ripper," confesses Will quietly. He turns his head to breathe in Hannibal's scent, his lips brushing warmly over the bare skin of his lover's neck. "A finale."

Hannibal huffs a small laugh. "I must say the idea of allowing Chilton to take credit is quite unpalatable."

"He has always wanted to be you, you know that."

"I never said he was a wise man."

"And he has always hankered to be known." Will's smirk is wicked and he nibbles at Hannibal's lower lip. "You're granting him his wish."

"You are trying to appease me." Hannibal kisses his younger lover and his left hand tugs him closer.

Will grins, wily and sharp. "Is it working?"

"I'll let you know."

The music comes to an end and Bach's *Air* comes on. The couple resumes their slow dance, Hannibal's steady pulse beating in sync with Will's. They each have their roles to play tonight. Hannibal's role is to be seen; Will's role is to be invisible. This is going to be Will's first such outing without Hannibal, and they are equally apprehensive over the many ways in which things can go wrong. However, Hannibal is reasonably certain that Will knows how to take care of himself; he's watched Hannibal often enough, and the young man is nothing if not quick-thinking.

In a few days, you will be my fiancé, Hannibal thinks with quiet, happy anticipation. *A new beginning of a new life.*

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It's appallingly easy to break into Chilton's home. The man is at the same benefit dinner as Hannibal - something for Médecins Sans Frontières - and it will be crowded with doctors and journalists. Will's absence is easily explained; the young man seldom accompanies Hannibal where there will be press, not since that one opera they attended and they made it onto the society pages. Most of Hannibal's acquaintances interpret it as a matter about preserving his career and reputation.

The password to Chilton's alarm is depressingly easy to guess. The narcissistic psychiatrist used the date of his first published book, something Will took the time to Google in a cafe earlier when he was having dinner. The interior of Chilton's house is stark, white, and empty, devoid of personality other than a few pieces of modern art. There are a few bookshelves. Most of them hold medical texts - Will guesses by the pristine nature of the dust jackets of the psychiatrist's books that they have not been touched in ages. A handful of popular psychology texts (bestsellers) and a neat stack of journals sit under the glass coffee table.

Will ventures into the basement with the first of three boxes of equipment. There is a guest room. It's well lit and spacious, and there is plenty of counter space. Perfect for his intentions. He goes to the front door and says softly, "Miriam, come in please."

She stands, takes the second box, and follows Will, her mind still blissfully drowned in Hannibal's cocktail of drugs injected into her system and the strange hypnotic state the psychiatrist has put her under. Will has no idea how Hannibal does it, but the woman is compliant and helpful. Together, Will and Miriam set the stage. While Will has his plastic suit and accouterments to keep himself from leaving a trace in the room, Miriam isn't. Her prints are everywhere.

When it is done, Will injects the agent with the syringe in his pocket as per Hannibal's instructions. She folds up on the bed and closes her eyes.

"It's all right, Miriam," he says, his voice low and soothing. The bindings are already laid out, as is the gag. "It'll all be over soon."

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When Hannibal gets home, he finds Will staring into the fireplace, a glass of Bordeaux by his hand. The med-kit is sitting by Will's feet.

"How did it go?" asks Hannibal, putting away the box.

"It went as we planned," Will says quietly. He appears troubled when he looks up at Hannibal. "I don't... She hasn't done anything wrong, Hannibal."

"No, she hasn't," Hannibal agrees. "Do you want her to live?"

"Her living will implicate us." Will takes a too-large swallow of his wine. "Her death will be unjustified. I don't know."

The older man stands behind his lover and trails his fingers through soft, dark curls that have been washed clean of hair gel. Hannibal marvels the robustness of Will's moral code; four years of living with him and Will is still a moral creature.

Will inhales deeply and lets his breath out in a sigh. "Sacrifices have to be made."

Hannibal says nothing.

"Her blood will be on my hands, Hannibal," says the young man, tilting his head back to regard the doctor. "I will take on this burden."

"You don't have to."

"She's going to die because I want you to live. Yes, I have to." Will exhales heavily again and stands, going around the chair to be held by Hannibal. "I have to feel the full guilt of killing someone who isn't bad, because her death must mean something. And you won't be able to feel the weight of what she deserves."

Hannibal's heart warms. Whenever he thinks he understands Will, the latter always surprises him once more. The thought of Will taking on the guilt and regret of having to murder Miriam Lass just to give her death *meaning*... It will elevate the woman to more than a pest. And she deserves the respect, too, for she found him.

He says nothing and just embraces Will, allowing the younger man to bury his face in Hannibal's skin.

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As arranged, Matthew picks him up after work on Tuesday evening. The nurse waves at a couple of Will's co-workers as Will tosses his work duffel in the back seat and climbs in next to his friend.

"So, Delia, right?" asks Will once he's buckled in. "And if I think she's not good for you?"

"I'll consult about the tattoo design and we remain friendly," says Matthew easily. "Look, I'm not gonna ask her out on a date yet. I'm not ready, and it won't be fair to her either."

Will chews on the inside of his cheek and says, "I hope she's nice."

"I think she is."

"You're not the best judge of character, Matthew Brown."

"Yeah, my best friend has a God complex and my best friend's boyfriend is a serial killer. I'd say my character-judging skills are piss-poor."

Will snorts. "And don't forget we both have Mikolaj as our good friend too."

"Oh yes, the rich and pampered." Matthew grins fiendishly. "We are so fucked up in the head, Will."

"Don't I know it," says Will. "I have a psychiatrist boyfriend. Trust me, we are beyond fucked up."

They talk about Matthew's intended tattoos and soon they are pulling up outside a small tattoo studio. Nothing in neon, thank goodness, but huge prints of bare backs with tattoo take up much of the shop windows. Will gets out first and frowns at the name. "The Skin Canvas?"

Standing next to Will on the sidewalk, Matthew shrugs noncommittally. He leads the way into the studio.

"Hey. Can I help you guys?" asks a broad-shouldered black guy at the door. His smile is very friendly. "Looking to get inked?"

Matthew nods. "Yeah, um. I've an appointment with Delia."

"Dee? She's in the back. Hold up. DEE!" The black guy has tattoos down both arms and over the back of his neck, intricate swirls and tribal patterns. "Hey. My name's Douglas. Dee and I own this studio. You in for watercolor tats or traditional?"

Before Matthew can answer, a slender young woman emerges from a room in the back. "Doug, you called? Oh, hey Matthew. You're really punctual."

Matthew shrugs and smiles shyly. "Hi Delia. This is Will, my best friend. Will's here to give moral support."

Will wags his fingers. "Hey."

"Hello. Come on to the back, there's more space. Doug, you okay out here by your lonesome? Need someone to hold your hand?"

"Fuck off, Dee."

They go to the back of the studio. On the walls are framed photos of a myriad of tattoos, ranging from the detailed tribal designs to abstract splashes of color; there's one huge print of a torso covered by a red dragon, its fangs and claws disturbingly menacing.

Delia perches in a chair and the guys sit down too. She smiles lopsidedly. "So. What kinda things are you considering for your tats?"

"Constellations," Matthew says immediately. "Ursa Minor and Aquilas on the chest, Serpens on my left deltoid, Vulpecula on my right deltoid."

"Just dots and lines? Or do you want, like, the actual thing those constellations represent?" Delia leans back and grabs a sketchbook and pencil. "Ursa Minor is, um... Little Bear. I dunno the actual constellation pattern but I know Ursa Major - which is like this - and we can have a Great Bear shadowing it." Her pencil skates rapidly over the paper. The guys let her work in silence for a couple of minutes before she flips the book around for them to see her drawing.

Will's eyes widen appreciatively. "That's beautiful."

"Thanks."

Matthew chews on the inside of his cheek. "It does look amazing," he says, "but that will mean I have four animals on me."

"What are the four you said?" Delia asks, handing over the sketchbook.

"Ursa Minor, Little Bear. Aquilas, eagle. Serpens, snake. Vulpecula, fox." Matthew scribbles the names down.

Delia doesn't ask about their significance. Instead, she goes to one of the shelves and pull out a few photo albums. "Here. Flip through, see what appeals to you. Depending on your preference, it could be me or Doug inking you. No rush though - it's a commitment after all."

Will stands and wanders around the studio to look at the framed photos more closely. There is a certain elegant ferocity in many of the designs, and he is drawn to one of a skull with moth wings, tattooed on a woman's shoulder blade.

Delia joins him. "You looking to get one too?"

"No," says Will. "My boyfriend wouldn't like it."

She studies him from under long lashes, and her lips curve in a cheeky smirk. Her voice drops into a whisper. "I was gonna guess you two were a couple. Exes?"

"Oh no, we never were together," says Will quickly. He glances at Matthew who's deep into the picture references.

"So you're the big brother that's gonna warn me about shovels and guns and not hurting him?" Delia raises her brows.

Will shrugs. "I think I'll be insulting your intelligence if I said anything like that."

"Well, Doug's *my* big bro. And he can probably take you in five minutes flat."

"Mattie's a good guy. He won't need the shovel talk."

"Oh, so you're the one I have to impress?"

Will grins. "I'm already impressed. I quite like you."

Delia snorts. "I don't know if I like *you*."

"If you and he begin dating, then I'll put in the effort."

The young woman chuckles and leaves him alone to chat with Matthew. Will observes them through the mirror, and smiles at Matthew when the latter catches him looking. He gives a discreet thumbs up.

Matthew blushes very faintly, just the tips of his ears, and pretends that he hasn't noticed.

Chapter End Notes

John Hejduk's *Victims*, Taxonomy of Structures
puppy print PJs
Canon in D

Chapter 23

They sneak into Chilton's home early Wednesday morning, once they see that Chilton has left for work. They have Gideon with them - what's left of Gideon anyway - and medical equipment, which they lug down to the guest room. When they get in, Miriam Lass unfolds but does not get up from the bed. Her eyes are glassy and empty, as though there is nothing operating the machine of her body.

"It's all right," says Hannibal in a calm, low voice. "It'll be over soon, Miriam."

The woman nods, and waits while Hannibal and Will set the stage. Once Gideon has been laid out on the bed and the equipment displayed to maximum effect, Hannibal retrieves a syringe from his tool bag.

"Are you certain, Will?" he asks, his gentle concern obvious.

The dark-haired young man nodded. He goes to stand behind her. "Close your eyes, Miriam."

She does.

Will cups her chin and the back of her neck. He takes a deep breath, and lets it out slowly, like he is getting ready to sing some Frank Sinatra. Then he closes his eyes and tightens his hold.

Hannibal waits. When he hears the crack of her spine and watches her tumble to the side like a puppet cut from its strings, her neck bent at an unnatural angle, he thinks that she has been bestowed the honor she deserves for truly *seeing* him, even though the price for her insight is death. The monster within purrs approval at the lack of hesitation and the neat manner in which this threat has been disposed of.

Will's face is pale and his eyes are very bright. He presses his lips together and his next inhalation is a shuddering gasp. "I-"

"You gave her death meaning," says Hannibal. He reaches out for his lover's hands. "Her death will not be a waste. It will bring us new life."

The younger man stares at Miriam, and then blinks rapidly when he looks at Hannibal. There is a moment in which Hannibal thinks he may lose Will forever, in which Will realizes he is well and truly past the point of no return. The moment stretches between the space of two heartbeats, and the doctor wonders if they will cross to the other side safely and together.

Finally Will smiles, shaky and soft. "There's still the matter of the kitchen, and we have to get to work."

"I will finish up here," says Hannibal. "Will you be alright with the kitchen?"

"Of course."

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At lunchtime, Matthew pauses before he knocks on Chilton's door. He muses silently that a good person - hell, even a decent person - would feel uncomfortable or guilty about what Dr Lecter and Will have planned for Frederick Chilton. While Chilton is petty, self-serving and smarmy, he is not deserving of what they intend for him.

Matthew is already certain he is not a good person.

If it takes Chilton's incarceration or death to ensure that Will has a happily ever after with his cannibal boyfriend, then Matthew will move heaven and earth to make sure that happens.

He raps on the door and carefully puts on a placid, pleasant smile. When Chilton opens the door and sees him, he ushers the nurse in quickly. "You have the documents?"

"Here," says Matthew, handing him the thumb drive.

"Thank you," says the administrator. The smugness in his gaze sets Matthew on edge; Chilton looked exactly like that the day he had Abel Gideon gabbling with Matthew in the same room. "Rest assured that I will remember your assistance when it comes time for your performance review."

The corner of Matthew's mouth twitches. "I-I need to take tomorrow off, Dr Chilton. Someone is coming to view my house. Sorry for the last-minute notice."

"You'll have to make up the hours though, and make sure someone can cover for you."

"Nash says h-he can take my shifts tomorrow and the day after and we'll swap days off for this week and next week."

"Mm-hmm." It's clear that Chilton's attention isn't on the conversation. He's already pulling on his coat and getting ready to leave. "I don't care who does the job, as long as it's done."

The young man excuses himself. His shift will be over in four hours. Plenty of time to get ready for Dr Lecter's plan.

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Alana sighs as she makes herself comfortable on Hannibal's office couch. "She's stressed and I don't blame her. An FBI agent going missing and the Ripper turns up at the same time... They're running themselves into the ground."

"There's been no headway in the cases?" asks Hannibal, passing a tall glass of beer to her. They have just finished going over the second draft of their article.

"No," says Alana. She has kicked off her heels and is trying to roll the tension out of her shoulders. "I'm scared, Hannibal. Miriam may be dead by now. We know the Ripper loves taunting Jack, and he has been grooming Miriam to catch the Ripper."

Hannibal sits next to her. He sips his wine and says, "It isn't Jack's fault if she has found him."

"But Jack will take it upon himself, and I think... I don't think Jack will wait for the law to deal with the Ripper if he catches him."

"You mean *when* he catches him, surely?"

"The Chesapeake Ripper... He's been active for so long, and he's so careful. Something tells me he may be the one that gets away, Hannibal," Alana says, a wistful regret coloring her tone.

Hannibal pats her shoulder reassuringly, the way he used to when she was still being mentored. "Let's hope that will not be the case." He checks his watch. "Will should be finishing up his day. Let's pick him up, and we'll have dinner at my place."

"I don't really mean to impose-"

"Nonsense. Your company is never an imposition." Hannibal smiles and offers a hand to help her stand. "I have two lovely racks of lamb waiting for us. I have missed making crown roast - we shall enjoy a good meal tonight, and we'll set aside some for Beverly. Feed the body, feed the mind. She may gain new insight after a proper meal."

Alana smiles. "That's assuming I actually get to see her tonight."

"It's no trouble to warm up whatever I pack for you," says Hannibal briskly. "Come. Will is waiting."

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The young man is waiting on the curb, one ear pressed to his cell phone. He beams happily on seeing Hannibal's Bentley.

"Yeah? And what did you tell her?" Will asks the other person on the line as he slides into the Bentley after tossing his duffel in the boot. He smiles at Alana in the back seat but doesn't halt his conversation. "Uh-huh... Really?... Mm. I don't know, I like the idea of the watercolor- Well, it looks more artistic... It's your body, Mattie, you decide."

Hannibal shakes his head fondly. They drive off, Will chatting to his friend all the while. Hannibal is aware that, to a casual observer, they are almost a parody of a parent and a child in a car. It matters little to him; he has no intention of trying to win the approval of swine.

Alana in the back is watching him - watching them - with an assessing gaze. Over the past few years, she has always been watching their interactions, as though she still isn't sure how she feels about it. He hasn't forgotten her initial rejection and shock on discovering the nature of their relationship, but he has forgiven her for it. Alana wants to save someone. It must be

hard for her not to be able to save Will Graham from what she perceived - or maybe still perceives - as a relationship with an imbalance of power.

They are about to pull into the driveway when Will finally hangs up. "Hey Alana. How's things? Joining us for dinner tonight?"

"Yeah, hope you don't mind."

"Of course not." Will unbuckles the seatbelt and peers over his shoulder. "You two have been working hard on the article. Please tell me you have changed the heading."

Alana grins. "Yes we have, we're going with the much-simpler *'Personality Characteristics of the Female Serial Murderer'*. Direct and straightforward."

They stroll together into the house, trailing behind Hannibal who heads straight into the kitchen.

"Mattie and I were reading the first draft the other night," says Will, helping Alana out of her coat, though he doesn't shuck his own. "But there isn't any commonality you've found among the four though."

"The incidence of female serial killers is fairly low to start with, so the sample size doesn't allow for greater generalization," Alana says. "I'm keen to explore further though."

Will smiles and helps to pour the two psychiatrists some wine. "I'm just hoping you two help to catch the Chesapeake Ripper soon. It just feels wrong knowing that he's active again - the last time was Freddie Lounds at Christmas, and I dread knowing what is in store this time. Hannibal had been so tense for that particular few cases." The young man ambles over to his lover and kisses him on the cheek. "I'm taking the dogs out. Unless you need my help?"

"It's alright," says Hannibal fondly. "It's been some time since Alana acted as my sous chef. And you still have to sort out the details with Mikolaj, don't you?"

"Yep I do. Sorry, Alana, hate to do this to a guest, but you're better at cooking than I am." Will ducks out the back door and calls out the to dogs.

The two doctors hear Winston's welcoming, gruff bark and Buster's delighted yipping, and then the sounds disappear from the back yard.

Alana pulls on an apron. "What do you need me to do?"

"The roasting vegetables, please," Hannibal answers, handing her the washed ingredients.

They work in companionable silence for a while. It isn't until the roast is simmering in its juices on the stove and they are seated at the low table in the corner that Alana speaks.

"He's very close to Matthew Brown, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is."

She peers at him, her warm eyes full of inscrutable concern. "You're not worried?"

Hannibal smiles at his former protege. "Do you feel that I ought to be worried, or perhaps jealous?"

She flushes. "They are around the same age and display more physically intimate gestures than most young men of their age towards their peers."

Hannibal swirls his wine thoughtfully. It is a long, pregnant pause before he says, simply, "I love Will. And I trust Matthew to remember his place."

Alana stares at her hands. "I still don't quite know how I feel about the two of you," she says softly.

"You believed that he turned to me in search of a male authority figure and as solace in his grief." The lines around Hannibal's eyes crease faintly in remembered amusement. "Has that assumption faded?"

"I'm not fully certain. I have my own biases in perception, Hannibal, and when it comes to children and family trauma, I tend to have a blind spot."

"You wouldn't have admitted to the presence of a blind spot four, five years ago."

"Four or five years ago, my assumptions about you wouldn't have been challenged. Your relationship with Will Graham challenged my entire framework of understanding about you."

Hannibal looks over. "The framework remains shaken?"

"It has been rebuilt." Wearing a tiny smile, Alana toasts him. "You love him, and, much against my expectations, he appears to love you as an equal, and the power dynamics in your relationship don't seem to be unbalanced. I don't know how you two do it, but you are doing it quite well."

The older man raises an eyebrow. "Beverly would regret not hearing you utter that line, Alana."

"What line- Oh!" She colors faintly, and then grins. The smile fades rapidly. "I hope they find something soon."

As though that is the cue, they hear Will leading the dogs in through the back door, and Hannibal gets up to put the roast into the oven.

"Dinner will be ready in half an hour," he tells Alana, before he goes to welcome Will home from his walk.

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Matthew has just stepped out of his shower when he hears the door. He hurries over, hair still dripping, and opens it.

Outside, Dr Chilton only has a coat over him and a haunted expression. A miasma of fear hangs over the man, making him look far smaller and more vulnerable than he has ever appeared. Yet he tries to speak in a calm, measured tone: "Good evening, Matthew. I need your help."

"Um, okay," says Matthew. "Come in."

The doctor enters and drops his bag with little fanfare.

"C-can I offer you anything, Dr Chilton?" asks Matthew.

"I just need coffee," Chilton says without preamble. "Do you have a spare towel so I can... I need a shower. Maybe dinner as well. Definitely some cash."

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Will's phone rings just as they are starting dessert, so the young man excuses himself to get it.

Alana samples the creme brulee and nearly moans with the taste melting on her tongue. She almost wolfs it down but manages to restrain herself; she sees a hint of Hannibal's amusement around his eyes.

"Oh stop that," says Alana briskly. The tops of her cheeks pink. "It's unfair how you're so good with cooking."

"You don't cook often enough with me to learn," says Hannibal in a placid tone.

"You have Will to be your sous chef. How's *his* cooking?"

"Only good with seafood. I despair of ever making him a chef." Hannibal finishes his own serving and accepts the brief peck on the temple when Will comes back to the table. "Who was that?"

Will sits down and cracks the top of the creme brulee. "Mikolaj. We're planning a surprise for Matthew. Well, mostly him, but I'm chipping in too."

"What kind of surprise?" asks Alana. "Unless it;s really private-"

"Nah. It's just, he's thinking of selling the house because he can't meet the mortgage payments on his income. He loves the place though, he's keeping it really clean and... and it's really all he has left of his mother and Esther."

Hannibal frowns faintly. "I'm not sure paying his mortgage for him is a good gesture, Will."

"I'm chipping in a portion to fund a renovation too," says Will blithely. He looks at the two psychiatrists and then rolls his eyes. "Look, it's not that complicated. Mattie isn't sure he wants to sell, not really. He's selling because he can't afford the upkeep, not because he hates the memories it holds for him. And I'm not sponsoring a huge reno, just to get the structure up to code and maybe some repainting or improving the insulation. If, in the future, he wants to sell it, it'll fetch a better price too."

Alana hums and shares a look with her mentor. Hannibal sets aside his dessert spoon. "I fear he may take your generosity as an insult."

Will snorts again. "Hannibal, I don't want psychiatric input on this, I want emotional support, okay? Put aside the doctor brains. I want boyfriend support. *Boyfriend*."

"As you wish, mon amour," says Hannibal with a tiny, crooked smile, and when he catches Alana's eyes the corner of his lips twitch. "Come, Alana, let's pack Beverly something for dinner."

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That takes mere moments, and Alana is soon putting on her coat at the door. Only Hannibal is with her; Will is doing the washing up. Brushing her hair from her face, she touches her cheek to Hannibal's and says, "Can't wait for Friday. Will is going to be so happy."

Hannibal's gaze soften and brighten at the same time. "As will I be. Thank you Alana, you have been of incredible assistance."

"I have the honor of being your Best Woman as thanks," says Alana sweetly. Hannibal holds the door open for her. "I just hope the Ripper won't keep us away from the surprise- oh. Oh, sorry." A glass jar rolls away from her foot where she has kicked it inadvertently. "I didn't see that. Here, let me get it."

She picks it up to hand it to Hannibal, but as she does so she sees what is in the jar and screams.

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Chilton in a plain sweater and loose jeans is a lot more suburban dad and a lot less administrator of a mental hospital. Matthew is slightly taller and lankier, so the legs of his jeans are scrunched up at the heel and the sweater is slightly too tight. Chilton doesn't care about how he looks. He takes a cup of coffee from Matthew with hands that shake very slightly; sweat beads along his brow and he keeps swiping over it. Matthew's dinner of macaroni and cheese has become Chilton's instead, but the nurse says nothing.

"You seem troubled, Dr Chilton," says Matthew slowly. "Wh-at happened?"

"Something bad." Chilton squeezes his eyes shut and kneads the bridge of his nose. "I'm being framed. Medical and surgical know-how, socially competent- I have - the

same *goddamned* profile! Of course it'll be me!"

"S-sir?"

"No, no it's alright. I'll be out of your hair really soon." Chilton drinks the rest of the coffee as quickly as he can. "It's um. The FBI may question the staff of the hospital. You have to tell them - you have to tell them you never saw me tonight. That I never came here."

Matthew bites his upper lip hesitantly. "Sir, the FBI?"

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Jimmy Price and Brian Zeller are both picking up glass shards and dusting the dry portions. Every partial print is photographed and tagged. The only one crouching, Beverly picks up the eyeballs and plopped them into the container. The accompanying note, damp with whatever liquid that had been used to keep the eyes moist, is already bagged and tagged.

"See? " was the only word on the slip of paper, along with a tiny "*C.R."* in the bottom right corner.

Her jaw is tense and she is *pissed*. The Ripper is threatening people she loves. When she finds him - and she *will* - she is going to shoot him like the cowardly psychopath he is.

"How dare you. How dare you. This is my fiancee, these are my friends. These are ***my people****. How dare you, you fucker."* The words run in an endless loop in her mind but she says nothing. She hands the container with the eyeballs to Jimmy and leaves the rest to her colleagues.

When she stands, she has to clench her fists to make sure she isn't going to say something murderous.

Hannibal and Will are standing just inside the entryway, watching the team work. Will is clutching his middle, looking miserable and frightened; Hannibal is pale, but his gaze is firm and - Beverly knows she isn't imagining it - full of righteous anger.

The agent only nods at the two men as she walks into the house. Alana is sitting on the chair in the foyer to have her statement taken. Jack hovers nearby. Rage and frustration are palpable waves coming off his broad form but he is silent, merely listening to Alana recount what happened.

"We done here?" Beverly asks.

"Yes," says the agent doing the interview, and scurries away to get Hannibal.

Beverly kneels in front of Alana and hugs her tightly. "We'll get him, Lanie. He's trying to taunt you that's all."

To her credit, Alana manages a weak smile. "Guess it's not working, because all I feel is terror."

Will comes into the foyer alone. Beverly rises to hug him too, but the young man is a rigid, angry line of bone and muscle. The agent retreats - and knows it for a retreat - to Alana; her fiancee takes hold of the hem of her jacket and keeps a light tug on it.

Jack clears his throat and says, "We will find him. He's coming out into the open, making contact with us. Such arrogant and cocky action will-"

"-he came to our home, Mr Crawford!" says Will loudly, cutting off the agent. The dark-haired young man covers his eyes and slides his hands down to his mouth. He looks ready to throw up. "He knows where we live. Where Hannibal lives. He knows - he knows he can waltz right up to our *door*- He knows that Alana and Hannibal can't *see* him, and so he gives them another pair of eyes, lord knows where he got them from..."

Beverly chews on the inside of her cheek. The eyes are very fresh. *A fresh perspective?*

He sags against the wall and wraps his arms about his chest, hugging himself, looking far too much like the lost and orphaned teenager he used to be. "I just- Mr Crawford, I really hate your job. I hate that Hannibal's good enough to help you and I *hate* this, I hate this. The last time Abel Gideon kidnapped me and then broke into our home and... I can't, I can't imagine what's going to happen next. I don't want to."

Jack's mouth twitched. "Unfortunately Dr Lecter and Dr Bloom are the best at what they do. And what they do helps to save lives."

"It sucks."

"I know," says Jack gently. He reaches out a hand and shakes Will's shoulder in a paternal manner. "I'll keep them safe. Beverly will too."

Will smiles faintly. "She has to, she's marrying Alana."

"We're going to be outside for a bit to get all the evidence we can, and then head down to the lab for immediate analysis." Jack is all business now. "Will, why don't you come with us afterwards? No place safer than the FBI."

"I don't know if I should hang around all this stuff with um, corpses and all that," says Will slowly. "They're not... good for me, emotionally and mentally. I get into a weird head space."

Alana speaks up. She is still holding on to Beverly's hem. "After Hannibal's statement has been taken and the techs are done with your front door, you can find someplace else to rest. Why don't you go to Mikolaj's or Matthew's? And, Jack, maybe you can assign a couple of police officers to stay with them. Safer that way."

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After he stuffs more borrowed clothes into a bag (which he borrowed from Matthew), Chilton keeps looking at his watch and refreshing the news feed on Matthew's computer. Matthew doesn't say anything, only topping up Chilton's coffee whenever it runs low. His phone buzzes frequently with messages but Chilton has it with him, and refuses to hand it to the younger man.

"I should have taken that bottle," says Chilton suddenly. "There must still be traces in it, there has to be. No reason for me to... But how? My security passcode..." He mutters to himself, as though trying to talk his way out of a nasty situation involving spikes and tar. "It must be someone I know well..."

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"Jack I got two partials already ID'ed. One is Dr Bloom's," says Zeller, "and the other belongs to Dr Frederick Chilton."

"Oh God, Chilton," says Alana, turning ashen. "We forgot about him! He's consulting on the Ripper case too, he could've been- He could have been contacted by..."

Hannibal's face darkens and he pulls Will close. "Or he could have been killed."

Though he doesn't acknowledge any of their comments, Jack orders an agent to go down with backup to check on Chilton, while he tries to call the doctor.

Alana and Hannibal watch Jack closely, while Will tries not to burrow into Hannibal's embrace and fails badly. The young man clings to his lover, his fingers digging into Hannibal's shirt, and keeps his gaze on his feet.

It's just too bad that he's so young, Alana thinks fleetingly with the familiar swoop of unease when she sees Will relying so obviously on Hannibal. *If they were closer in age, they would be perfect.* Her thoughts quickly returns to Chilton. While she has little liking for the greasy, self-important man, she doesn't want him meeting his end at the Ripper's hands. No one deserves that end.

Will takes a deep breath and detaches himself from Hannibal for a second. "Just so you know, I hate your job when you have to do things like this."

"I am saving lives, Will."

"You have a pathological desire to understand violence and death and you know it." Will glares fondly and worriedly at his lover. "If you get yourself killed, I'm gonna find you and bring you back to life just so I can kick your ass and kill you myself again."

Hannibal only smiles and presses a lingering kiss to Will's cheek. "I know, mongoose. I know."

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Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's nearly ten more minutes before the FBI begins to leave the scene. It's almost ludicrous, the number of serious-faced men and women looking for shoe prints or fingerprints, just for a single jar containing eyeballs. Hannibal likes the absurdity of it. It is all so theatrical, this play he and Will have co-authored, and all their players so oblivious to their parts yet playing them perfectly.

Earlier, Jack Crawford has set one of the junior agents on Will - an agent Starling, who has bright eyes and calm resolve - and told her to stay with the young man until he gives her the okay to leave. Hannibal already misses Will's presence. The young man is an excellent actor; Hannibal wonders if Will hasn't missed his true calling. The stage is deprived of a natural who can inhabit any skin and bring them to life. Will's capacity for empathy makes him dangerous even beyond Hannibal's reckoning.

"The Ripper seems to be making this personal," says Jack, glancing around. "I don't know if there is any surveillance from your neighbors that might capture an image, but it's possible."

"There are also many blind spots even if we depend on security footage, Jack." The psychiatrist smiles faintly at the memory of Will before the latter got into Agent Starling's car. Will was all nervous defiance and reluctance, the only giveaway a small tilt of his mouth when he made eye contact with Hannibal. He keeps his eyes on the vehicles around them and thinks about exits and entrances, and of thresholds and changes. "I'm hopeful that, in his hubris, he leaves a fingerprint. Something we can use. It has been some time since he deliberately stirred the hornets' nest."

"You think he's bored, that's why he's staging a comeback?" asks Jack, his mind leaping to the assumption Hannibal wants him to make.

Hannibal lifts an eyebrow, his version of a shrug. "Perhaps. The last confirmed Ripper kill was Freddie Lounds, and the recent guard with Miss Lounds' hair in his mouth seem to be telling something about the Ripper. The brutal elegance is still present - it is the message I am having difficulty seeing. And that, apparently, is something the Ripper has noticed too, or he wouldn't be reminding me of my failure."

"You?"

"This is my home, Jack," says Hannibal reproachfully. "While he must have been delighted to know that Alana is here, the message was meant for me. Will's fears for our safety are not unfounded."

Before Jack can respond, Beverly jogs up to them, Alana trailing behind her. "Jack, I called Ren and Whitehall to go to Chilton's. The door was opened so they went in. They found

Miriam." There is a beat, her eyes darting from Jack to Hannibal and back to her supervisor. "She's dead."

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Will has to fight the inappropriate urge to smile when he hears the alert over the radio, telling all officers to be on the lookout for Frederick Chilton, who is suspected to be armed and dangerous. Instead he looks out the window and curls in a little on himself.

"Everything okay?" asks Starling.

"Yeah, I... I mean, I know Chilton. He's eaten at our house." Will covers his mouth. "I-I don't... I never liked him but, *dangerous?*"

Starling hums tunelessly. "No one knows how dangerous another person can be. I've learned that we can all be willfully blind to the strangest things in life. Not seeing how an acquaintance is dangerous is hardly an unusual thing."

Truer words have never been spoken.

If you so want to be Hannibal, Will thinks viciously, recalling the disdain and condescension Chilton always displayed towards him, *then Hannibal you will be.*

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Chilton puts on his coat and slips his handgun into his coat pocket. "Thank you for the money, Matthew."

"I-I can't do much more than that, but I hope it helps," says Matthew. He sticks his hands in his pockets. "Y-you sure you don't want to tell the p-police? I mean, what you said just now..."

"Matthew, one of those I found was an FBI agent. Do you know what they do to people who kill - who are suspected of being cop-killers?" Chilton throws his bag over his shoulder. "The roads should be clear by now. I have to get out of the country. Remember: I was never here if anyone asks."

Matthew leans against the wall and frowns. "Why did you come h-ere in the first place, Dr Chilton? I-I-I mean, you have friends who'd help you. Better than just a, a simple nurse."

The doctor hesitates with his hand on the doorknob. Then he replies briskly, "The FBi would question them first. I don't want them to be put to such trouble."

Matthew cocks his head. If he feels anything less than what he does for Will, he may actually help Chilton right now. The older man is lonely, and he has no one he trusts enough to help him. However, Matthew also remembers the way Chilton essentially forced him to sit in on the sessions with Gideon, and the avaricious manner in which he took the thumb drive from Matthew. The little ways he's made the hospital his own playground with its own laws, where the patients are pitted against one another in little games of dominance or manipulation. The fact that he is far more concerned about himself than the people he found dead in his house.

If only you know I could have killed you this afternoon, Matthew thinks with great scorn.

Once his shift was over, Matthew had gone to Chilton's home to wrap up what Dr Lecter and Will has set in motion. The gloves, paper booties, and beanie had there just inside the gate. It is still hilarious imagining his best friend and Dr Lecter wearing these, nut he suspect that they have other means to protect themselves from leaving forensic evidence. The drugged wine was taken away and disposed off, poured into some shrubs a few miles down the road and the bottle tossed into a recycling bin on Matthew's way home. Chilton himself was dragged down to the guest room and left in the same bed as the woman, whose eyes were missing. Lord knows how Chilton felt when he woke up to her and then saw Gideon without any of his limbs.

Matthew knows he isn't a decent human being, but he thinks Chilton may be worse at being a person. At least Matthew cares about some people other than himself.

He hears an engine rumbling up the drive and peers out the kitchen window. Chilton is instantly alert, his eyes haunted. "Who's that?"

"It's Will Graham," says Matthew, unable to help the warmth that colors his tone. Perhaps he has transferred the protective instincts he had for Esther to Will. Probably. He doesn't care. Will is his to take care of now.

"What is he doing here?" Chilton shoulders Matthew aside and then freezes in shock when he sees the woman walking up the drive with him, her badge still pinned to her coat. "That's an FBI agent with him. You told him I was here?"

Matthew steps back and rises his hands placatingly. "No, I didn't. I didn't even know he was coming over tonight."

"Why would he..." Chilton's eyes narrow, and then he pales. "Will... Hannibal Lecter. *Hannibal Lecter*- Oh my god, oh my god, it was him. It is him, all along-" He swivels on his heel and pulls out his gun. Pointing the weapon shakily at Matthew, he snarls, "Are you in on this?"

The front door opens. Chilton grabs Matthew and jabs the gun into his temple. "You- you son of a bitch, you and Hannibal did this-"

Will's eyes go wide and vulnerable when he realizes what has happened. The agent behind him whips out her own gun and says in an even tone, "Sir, put down the weapon now."

"Dr Chilton! Oh god Mattie-" Will Graham holds up his hands when Chilton shifts the gun. "Please, let Mattie go, he's done nothing to you-"

"Shut up!" Chilton snaps, his breathing rapid and hot. He's shorter than Matthew so the nurse is blocking the agent's line of sight. "Step into the living room. Go on! I'm going to leave, and you're not going to stop me, you hear? I'm not going to be your sacrificial lamb-"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" yells Will, clearly distraught. "For God's sake let Mattie go, please, he's my *friend*-"

Chilton drags Matthew to the front door and steps down. The nurse shuffles his feet, catches the agent's gaze, and forces himself to trip and fall forward abruptly.

A gunshot rings out.

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Hannibal and Alana are following Jack's vehicle in Hannibal's Bentley when they get a call from the man himself. Alana puts her phone on speaker. "Yes, Jack?"

"Beverly actually. We've located Chilton."

"That's good," says Alana.

"No i isn't. The agent we sent with Will? She shot Chilton. She says-" Here Jack Crawford takes over in his gruff voice: *"Chilton was holding Matthew Brown hostage when Will got there with agent Starling."*

Hannibal's knuckles turn white on the wheel. "Is Will all right?"

"Yes he is," says Beverly. *"Matthew's okay too. He pretended to trip and gave Starling the opening she needed. Now we gotta know why he was at Matthew's. Hannibal, you'll have to take point, we'll follow."*

Reassured of Will's safety, Hannibal agrees and gets ready to turn at the next junction.

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Matthew and Will sit together on the sofa, Will holding one of Matthew's hands and squeezing. Agent Starling is still on the phone with one of her superiors, telling them about what she has just done. The front door is open but from the sofa, Matthew and Will can't see Chilton's body.

Under his breath, Will murmurs, "You did great, Mattie. That was fantastic."

"I'm just glad I didn't get a bullet in my head," says Matthew. He shuts his eyes and breathes out slowly. In a small voice, he asks, "Is it over now? Are we done?"

"We are," says Will. "You've already done everything possible. I'm so proud of you."

They are both cognizant of Starling's discreet scrutiny. It may be odd for them to be this close, given how she has seen Hannibal and Will exchanging a kiss earlier, but Will doesn't give a fuck. Triumph races golden through his veins, like venom.

He is beyond elated at what Matthew has proven to him, to them. Matthew is *his* now, his to adore and shelter and be protected by. It may be selfish and cruel of Will to have manipulated Matthew into transferring his need to protect to Will, but in the same vein, Will and Hannibal offer Matthew people who understand him and his darker self. He reminds himself that this is enough. There will come a time when Matthew will choose to act upon his darker impulses,

and when that time comes, he will turn to his best friend and Hannibal. He will *become* only then, and not before. Will has done as much as he ought to, to urge Matthew's evolving.

The FBI agent blows out her cheeks and then smiles at them tiredly. "What a day, huh."

"Yeah," says Will. He lets his head rest on Matthew's shoulder. It feels entirely natural to do so. Matthew rubs his cheek against Will's dark curls, and the latter finds that entirely natural too. "It started out so nice too. Now I just want this week to end."

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Matthew sighs. "We'll have to give our statements and all that. And I'm not sure if I still h-have my job, if the hospital will still, I don't know. If it'd still run. Since hanging out w-ith you, I've had twice as much crap to deal with."

"Sorry."

"Not your fault."

"Still sorry." Will links his arm with Matthew's and rests his chin on the older guy's shoulder. "I'm sure Hannibal can offer free therapy if you want."

The nurse glares at Will, and then relaxes into the warm, lean presence beside him. *This feels like home,* he thinks privately, enjoying the hand clasped in his and Will's earthy-woody scent. He's still attracted to his best friend, of course - no going around that - but increasingly, he just wants to make sure Will is happy, much like how he used to want to make sure Esther was happy.

He wonders what Delia or any future girlfriend may feel about this. There is no way he will give up having this sort of casual intimacy with Will Graham. Scraps from a table and all that, but he doesn't require more. It's enough that Will adores him and wants him to be part of his and Dr Lecter's lives. Perhaps it's odd to admit it to himself, but he's perfectly satisfied belonging to Will without Will belonging to him. Perhaps this is what it feels like to be Winston and Buster. He stifles a chuckle at the idea of being one of Will's mutts, and the chuckle earns him a strange look from the agent and a prod in the ribs from Will.

"I was just thinking of your dogs," says Matthew.

Will only tilts his head to regard him. "You are picking them up Thursday, right?"

"Yes, after I talk about the listing with a realtor." Matthew sighs, and relaxes further. "I'm going to miss the house. I didn't want to stay in here after... after Esther died, but I'm beginning to remember this place as where she lived. If I can afford it, I'd stay on."

"Hmm." Will settles back into the light cuddle, and drums his fingers on Matthew's skin. The idyllic moment is disrupted by Will's phone ringing loudly with a jazzy melody. The younger man jumps off the sofa to grab his phone from his coat on the dining table.

"Yeah, Bev?" says Will with a small smile. "What?"

Matthew saw the smile drain from his friend's face, to be replaced with a vivid, stark terror that shows only in the blue-gray eyes. All color is leeched from Will's cherubic face and a tension comes into his slim frame.

Will ends the call without saying goodbye. He looks at Matthew and says, in a voice devoid of emotion, "Drive me to the hospital."

Starling looks confused. "What? No, wait, we have to take your statements."

"My boyfriend's got into an accident," says Will in the same flat tone, "and so help me God, unless you shoot me right the fuck now, I am going to the hospital where he is. Mattie?"

*****

In the end, Starling drives them there, after conferring with Jack Crawford on what to do.

In the backseat Will is deathly calm and still, like a statue of an avenging angel, waiting to be brought to life. Matthew doesn't dare touch his best friend, not in this moment. The aura of pure menace is something he has never felt before, not even when they were scalping and torturing Greene. That had been unnerving to a small extent, to see Will lock away his humanity and empathy.

Now he is practically *brimming* with icy wrath. There is a look in his eyes that promises a reckoning to whomever has hurt Hannibal. Matthew thinks Will has never looked more alive, more glorious, and more terrifying.

They make it to the operating theater, Will leading the way.

"What happened?" he demands.

"Drunk driver, side-on collision," says Beverly. "Alana's injured too, but not as severely. She's being patched up - two broken ribs and a bruised right leg. Jack and I were in the vehicle behind, we saw everything."

"Where's the driver? Is he alive?"

Jack Crawford snorts. "He's only got a few lacerations and a broken arm. The son of a bitch is already in a ward." Then, as though remembering his audience, he says, "Matthew Brown, we need to take your statement. Do you mind?"

Will wanders to one side once he gets his answers and stands with his arms around himself. None of the others go to him; perhaps, like Matthew, they sense the pure, unadulterated rage the young man is exuding, and want no part of it.

Matthew shakes his head. He glances at Will, still staring at the wall, still frozen in that position. "Of course not. I, uh, I should call a friend. For Will. He's going to need us if..."

"That's not going to happen," says Beverly sharply. "He'll make it. He has to."

"Call whomever you need, Matthew," says Mr Crawford with a kindly gleam. "We'll keep praying for the best. Beverly, I want you to run point at Chilton's home. Every scrap of fiber, every strand of hair, every fingerprint must be logged in and checked. I want Miram Lass to be top priority, from autopsy to tox, everything. I want to know if we have ended the Ripper's run."

"Gotcha." Beverly nods and prepares to go. She looks around and then says, a worried frown creasing her forehead, "Where's Will?"

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Even though he feels like he's walking in fog, Will finds the man easily enough. He's a slightly pudgy man with a scraggly beard, and there is a police officer who has just finished taking his statement. Will waits until the officer leaves before he slips into the ward.

"...Hey," says the man. He winces as he tries to straighten. Narrowing his eyes, the man says, "You're not a nurse, are you?"

"No I'm not," says Will. He pulls up a chair and looks at the injuries the man has sustained. "My friend was in the car you hit. She's been patched up. I just wanted to check in on you. What's your name?"

"Vardan." The man flushes, the bruises and lacerations on his face darkening. "I'm so sorry, I really shouldn't have had that third glass. I got distracted and... They okay?"

"Driver's still in surgery, but Alana's okay." The corner of Will's mouth twitches. "I'll convey your apologies to them, Vardan."

"Man I'm really sorry," says the man again. "I'm not sure if I can pay for the damage but I will try."

Will takes a pillow from the empty bed behind him and hugs it briefly. His pulse is steady and that steadiness is evident in his voice. "I hear you. I know you're sorry about the accident, I really do. And I will tell them." He smiles disarmingly at Vardan and stands up. "I'm sure they'll even forgive you. They're good people."

Abruptly the smile disappears from Will's face and he surges forward with the pillow to smother the injured man. Vardan struggles, his shouts muffled, his broken right arm pinned under Will's weight, and his legs kick out frantically but do nothing to dislodge Will. The young man keeps pressing down with the pillow, his face set like granite and his eyes unblinking.

Doors are slammed open behind him and suddenly he is yanked off his feet by someone grabbing him around the torso. He doesn't let go of the pillow until he's dragged clear of the hospital bed, and the police officer has rushed in with some burly male nurses. Even so, Will tries to get back to killing Vardan. He reaches for the injured man with all his might, straining with every ounce of muscle. Whomever is holding him is stronger, however, and keeps a secure hold on him.

Rescued, Vardan gulps in air, his face wet with tears and snot. "What the fuck!" he chokes out. He's cradling his right arm. "The fuck are you doing, you crazy bastard?"

"I'll fucking kill you!" screams Will, kicking and clawing at the thick arms restraining him. "If Hannibal - if anything, *anything* happens to Hannibal, if he doesn't come back to me the way he is, I'll fucking *end* you, you hear? *I'll hunt you down and end you you piece of shit! You goddamn son-of-a-bitch!*

"Will!" shouted Jack. He tightens his hold on the slender young man and pulls him out of the ward. "Will, calm yourself! Hannibal's still in surgery-"

"-I want that man *dead*-"

"Will, stop it!" Matthew comes into view, blocking Will's line of sight to Vardan's ward. He slaps the younger man twice, hard, momentarily stunning his friend into silence. "Come on, you don't want to be thrown out and barred. Dr Lecter will need you here."

Uncomprehending and half-blind with wrathful tears, Will stares blankly at his friend. He stops fighting. Jack doesn't release him entirely though, keeping his hands on Will's shoulders. The breath that Will takes is shaky and shallow, and then he grabs fistfuls of Matthew's shirt. His fingers dig into the nurse's shirt and he's shuddering, trembling like he's coming down with hypothermia.

"Mattie, he hurt Hannibal," says Will, his voice that of a lost child's. "Hannibal's hurt, he could be- he could... What if- I can't... Mattie, I can't. I can't. If... God, I can't do this. I can't do this. Mattie I can't do this I'm so scared I can't-" He babbles on, the words tumbling like beads cut from a necklace.

Matthew takes hold of him from Jack Crawford, pulling him into a tight embrace. A warm hand soothes over his curly head, as though he's being petted like one of his dogs. Over his shoulder, Will hears something about sedation and shock, but doesn't even register the sting of a needle before he falls into oblivion.

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The very next day, thanks to a leak in the police force, the story explodes.

By Friday it is a media circus. Newspapers are having a field day with the discovery of the Chesapeake Ripper's guest room abattoir. The evidence all points to Chilton: the drugs, Gideon, and most damningly, Miriam Lass and her eyeless corpse. The FBI are coming under fire for having hired an outside consultant that was a serial killer; the tabloids print sensationalist stories of the upper class being charmed or flattered by "the Chesapeake Ripper himself!" While some of Chilton's old med school chums claim Chilton had lousy surgical skills, the argument put forward was that he wanted to prove that he was better than had been believed of him. An ego trip to show them what he was capable of.

Strands of hair from various known Ripper victims are dug out from under the guest bed mattress, all sorted by color. Some still have follicles attached, others don't, and the FBI forensics team are swamped by all that is going on. Families need closure, and now, only their investigation will give them any. Jack seems less driven, now, but no less determined to answer questions.

Alana is already home, and Beverly thanks her lucky stars for that. She feels a surge of guilt that she can't say the same for either Will or Hannibal, however.

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The Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane is similarly invaded by investigators. In Chilton's absence and before a new administrator could be found, Dr Freyman runs the show. There is a stronger sense of order, and the staff isn't yet sure if they're happy about the change. It's only been two days, after all.

Matthew wishes he could feel gleeful about all this. He just feels worried about Will and Dr Lecter.

He's been questioned multiple times, and each time he gives the same story with some slightly altered words. After Will was sedated, Matthew had stayed with him until Mikolaj turned up and took over. The two friends have each taken turns to sit at the hospital with Will, even though Will hasn't moved from Dr Lecter's bedside much in the past two days.

It's worse for Matthew because it is Friday, and he knows what Will originally planned for that day. Will has even told him to bring him his work duffel, which he had left in his Camry at home. It's not the tools he wants, Matthew knows, but the ring nestled inside it.

When he turns up at the hospital, he sees Mikolaj stretching in the corridor outside Dr Lecter's ward. He goes over, gives Mikolaj a friendly thump on the back, and asks, "How's things?"

"My aunt came by earlier, sorted things out with that driver," says Mikolaj, scratching at the scruff he's now sporting. "As for Will... Not much better. He's answering in monosyllables. Only stepped away for bathroom breaks and when the nurses check him over, and even then he stays in the room to watch. I made him eat a tuna sandwich but he should get some sleep."

Matthew exhales. "You and I both know he won't."

"You have a better chance of convincing him than I do," says Mikolaj without rancor. He shares a brief hug with Matthew. "I don't know if Will has told you this, or if this is the right time, but I'm flying off in a couple days for a business meeting. Anyway, you don't have to worry about the house any more."

"What?"

"Your mortgage has been paid in full."

"...*What?*" Matthew is flabbergasted. His eyes bulge and he covers his mouth. "Miko, you didn't-"

Mikolaj shrugs. "Look, you don't really want to sell, and all it needs are some touchups and maybe better insulation. That, you can take care of. If you don't feel comfortable with my paying it off, then consider me your landlord, and all you gotta do is pay for the upkeep. Fresh paint, trim the yard, all that shit."

"Miko, I can never... How do I even begin to thank you for that-" Matthew can feel tears welling up in his eyes and forces them away.

"By taking care of our little bro in there," says Mikolaj. He sighs and slides his hands into his pockets, bouncing a little on his heels. "I feel... I feel responsible for him, somehow."

Matthew chews on the inside of his cheek. "So do I. A staggering amount of resposibility."

"And we both know that if, um, if Dr Lecter... If things go south, he's only got us to look out for him."

"Dr Lecter will make it," says Matthew firmly. He can't allow himself to believe otherwise.

"Yeah."

The two young men turn in unison to stare at the door to the ward. Matthew inhales sharply and nods, once, like he's about to march into battle.

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Will is sitting by the bedside, grasping Hannibal's large hand. The usually clever and dexterous fingers are limp and lifeless, and Will hates that. He wants those fingers to grasp his hand. He wants Hannibal to pin him down again and use those clever hands to map out Will's body the only way he knows how. He wants to hold those hands and dance with them on his hips, he wants to watch those hands prepare exquisite meals, he wants to see those hands carve up the undeserving.

He hears Matthew come in but doesn't do more than make a small sound in his throat to acknowledge his presence.

"Hey," says Matthew, dropping Will's heavy bag on the floor beside him. "Miko tells me you haven't slept."

"I can't. He might wake up."

"At least nap in the chair, Will. You don't have to go anywhere. I'll wait here."

Will licks his lips. His head is fuzzy, and he knows he needs to rest, but he's terrified that if he sleeps, something bad will happen to Hannibal. The psychiatrist looks - for the first time in Will's memory of the man - frail and weak. He is wrapped in too many bandages, because half his ribs are either broken or fractured, and the left side of his face is badly discolored with bruises. There is a deep cut across the bridge of his nose that is likely to leave a scar.

The doctors say that it will be a long and arduous recovery when Hannibal wakes up. Will doesn't care how long it will take. He's going to help Hannibal through it all.

If only the man would just *wake up*.

"Can you give me some water?" he asks.

Matthew pours him a glass and helps steady it when Will's hands shake. The nurse sighs and ruffles Will's faintly greasy hair. "You need to take care of yourself, Will."

Will doesn't dignify that with a response. He studies Hannibal's slack face. Will wants Hannibal to wake up and fuss over his own treatment, and for Will to have a chance to tease him about doctors being the worst patients.

His breath hitches. "Mattie, just give me a moment alone with him, please? Help me get dinner or something."

"Sure."

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Hannibal looks up from the chopping block and smiles at the two girls sitting at the table. It is a sunlit afternoon and the berry bushes around them are full of fruit; huge bowls piled with dark red berries sit like spoils of victory near Esther and Mischa. Both of them are coloring a page together, occasionally grabbing berries to eat. The fruit stains their mouths with deep crimson.

From Hannibal's vantage point, he can't really see what they are coloring, but the sheen of red on his sister's and Esther's mouths look out of place. He wipes his hands on his apron and go to them with napkins.

"You'll spoil your appetite if you eat that," he scolds gently, and cleans Mischa's mouth and chin, and then does the same for Esther.

Esther pouts. "We have to eat them or they'll go bad."

"I'll eat them," says Hannibal. "I'll get Will and your brother to eat them too. Rest assured, Esther, these won't go to waste."

"But it's not good for your tummy," says Esther. "It's not good for their tummies also."

"We won't eat all of it."

"But there's so much..." Esther sighs, and bends her brown head to her coloring page again. Mischa just holds Hannibal's hand and rests her chubby cheek against it, petal-soft and warm.

Now Hannibal can see what they are coloring in, and he frowns. It's a picture of the Wound Man. Esther is using a lot of red, and there's a liquid quality to her color pencils that should not have been there. It is disturbing on a level he hasn't felt for a long time. When he glances

at the bowl of berries, he realizes they are tiny little hearts, no bigger than the first knuckle of his thumb, each of them beating slowly. Nightmarish minuscule metronomes.

This is a dream, and he has not allowed himself to dream without structure for years. Not since he mastered lucid dreaming.

The doctor lets Mischa hold on to his hand for a while longer before gently disengaging. He pats her on her fair head, and feels a pang of longing. *Mischa, Mischa;* he has yearned to see her for so long, and she is still unchanged in his mind - she has never aged, never been tainted by the darkness of the world, and now she has been dragged into his kitchen through no fault of her own. There is a swift and sudden rage against his own mind's corruption of his memory of his beloved sister, and the sunlight is suddenly blotted out.

Neither girl pays attention. Mischa is now smearing red all over the table with her little hand, her perfect little hand that he held on with all his strength and still failed - with great difficulty, Hannibal shakes himself free from that recollection.

There is a muffled quality to the air around him, as though he is wrapped in velvet. He can't remember how he got here. When he looks around, there are no doors. There is the kitchen with its preparation area, the table where the two girls are, and the bushes growing right through the floor. There is no exit.

The dreams he remembers always start in the foyer, and then he would head up the weathered *Scalinata della Trinità dei Monti* into the vastness of his memory palace. He has no concept of where he is right now and it irks him; how is he to impose order on this?

He hears the piano, and smiles tenderly. It is Will playing *Für Elise* - it has to be Will, no one else can cajole the notes out on so gentle and loving a tone from the Blüthner - and if Will is here, then there has to be an exit somewhere that will lead to him. Peering around again, he sees the door to his pantry. That being the only door, Hannibal opens it and steps into its darkness, with only one last lingering look at Esther and Mischa, who are now laughing at something Esther had scribbled.

Will is out there, Hannibal reminds himself, and turns away.

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"We're supposed to go to the riverside today," says Will quietly, grasping Hannibal's limp right hand in his own. "It's our anniversary and... and I wanted us to go where I gave you the moon. Do you remember that? I was so clumsy about it, and your lips felt so warm against my skin, and, and we kissed on the river bank while the sweet potatoes were roasting - I can't even remember how many I ate, but I know I was watching you peel off the foil and the skin, and I never wanted to stop kissing you."

He digs into his work duffel and pulls out the velvet-lined box. It is with a faint smile that Will plucks out the ring.

"I had plans for today, mon coeur," he confides in a whisper. "I was gonna... I was going to redo the whole 'give you the moon' thing, because I know you love symmetry. I was gonna go

down on one knee and all that. I mean, I even have a speech prepared, and I know we'll have kissed again, like when I first asked, and then I'll put the ring on your finger, and..."

It's almost as though someone else is piloting Will's body, because he takes Hannibal's right hand and kisses it, kisses the knuckle of the fourth finger, and slides the ring on. It fits perfectly, and glitters in the hateful fluorescent lighting. Will's heart aches with how at home the ring looks on his lover's hand. His vision blurs at the edges with tears and he smiles weakly.

"And you'd have pretended to be aghast at how... at how flashy, how *gaudy* this ring is, you'll even say something like that to me, but you'll wear it all the same. You'll wear it to the opening night of the new production of *Madame Butterfly*, wear a dark, somber tux to better show it off, with me on your other arm pretending to give a shit about the herd coming to you for scraps. I know you. You'll play it really cool and, and won't ever talk about it, but all of them will notice anyway, but only Mrs Komeda would ask outright, and I'll be all bashful and you'll narrate the proposal and make it sound more romantic than it actually was... And I need, I need you to do this, Hannibal, I need you - I need you to wake up so I can do this properly, so we can-" Will sniffs and covers his eyes. His voice cracks with strain and his breath hitches painfully. "God, Hannibal, I can't... I don't even care if I can't propose properly, I just need you to be with me. How do I - How am I supposed to go through- I can't go through this, not without you- I don't want to, Hannibal, I love you, I love you and this is fucking *stupid,* we're not in some soap opera and *I need you with me*-"

He vaguely registers the door opening again but doesn't remove his hands from his face. He can't; it feels like he's cupping all his tears to his face, like he'll break beyond repair if he opens his eyes. Blindly he reaches for Hannibal's right hand and grips it, feeling the diamond ring cut into the faded scar on his left palm, while his own right hand remains shielding his eyes from the rest of the world.

Matthew comes up behind him and carefully drapes a jacket over his shoulders, before pulling the younger man back to lean against Matthew's stolid warmth. "It's alright, Will. I'll watch over you. Both of you."

Chapter End Notes

yes I went for the trope muahahaha
also, in case you can't remember, this is the ring Will chose for Hannibal. It's an antique!

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

> This is the penultimate chapter. Thank you for your love and support for the story!
> Epilogue will be brief - I think, I haven't planned that out yet, but yes it'll be there.

Hannibal knows his house is not as endlessly large as his dreamscape is making it out to be. It bothers him that he can't call on his memory palace; the labyrinthine corridors and dark rooms remind him of the claustrophobic atmosphere in the orphanage. The lack of control gnaws at him, bringing with it icy bite of fear on his heels.

At least he hears Will's playing. There is no particular direction he walks. He just does, following the trail of piano music that he has heard his beloved play dozens of times since they got together. Für Elise has long since passed into Chopin's Nocturne in E Flat Major, and now Moonlight Sonata echoes in the passageways of Hannibal's mind. To be honest, the doctor has no idea what he is meant to gain from this. Other people may learn much from exploring their subconscious, but Hannibal knows himself in ways few do, and he finds even the possibility of such exercise tedious in the extreme.

He needs to recall why he is here in the depths of his mind, though. The last thing he remembers - and it is a fond recollection - is of him kissing Will in the morning, while the younger man is still brushing his teeth. Will had been sleepy-eyed, responding with only a grunt, and the domesticity of it all had suffused Hannibal with a deep, encompassing joy far surpassing the exhilaration of a well-sung aria or the sublime glee of dissecting the rude.

The music changes, again, this time a jazz piece Hannibal has only heard twice. He strides forward, purposeful and unhurried. He will find a way back to his lover.

Time has no meaning here, but Hannibal hopes he won't linger too long in this tangled maze of his mind. Will must be worried.

He sees a little door - worn wood, gray with age, and with rusty hinges - and pushes through. On the other side is a flight of steps climbing up into a dense, choking darkness. Hannibal raises an eyebrow; he has not feared the dark for a very long time.

And then he realizes that the world around him has fallen silent.

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Despite Will's desperate prayers, Hannibal remains in a coma. He's hooked up to too many machines, and far too many bandages swathe his form. The bruises on his face have actually

hidden the one severe cut, but it's visible now, a brutal line with patches of purple-yellow skin as the canvas - the scar runs from just under his left cheekbone and slices across the top of Hannibal's nose bridge. On a brighter note, Hannibal will recover from his internal injuries, the doctors tell Will, but none of them can assure Will about when Hannibal will wake up.

On the second night, after his shift is over, Dr Donald Sutcliffe came by. He takes it upon himself to tell Will that Hannibal may not wake at all. "The brain is both resilient and fragile. It all depends on him, really."

"Then he will wake," says Will quietly. He stares the doctor down; he knows Sutcliffe and Hannibal had a brief affair, a long time ago, and his dislike of the man uncoils in the pit of his stomach like a snake. "He will wake up for me."

"Life isn't a fairy tale, Mr Graham." Sutcliffe regards him with grave condescension, and Will makes himself smile confidently.

"No, it isn't. Nonetheless, Hannibal will wake up for me."

Will ignores the doctors after that. The nurses make sure Hannibal doesn't remain in the same position for too long, so that he won't suffer muscle atrophy and bed sores, but Will learns and takes over where he can. He doesn't want other people, *strangers*, to touch his lover unnecessarily.

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One nurse comments on the engagement ring on the third day. "They are supposed to remove the jewelry before surgery," she says, almost accusingly. Then she adds, "Seems kinda tacky for a man too."

That evening, Will writes her name into one of his old battered notebooks, right below Vardan Ohanesian and Donald Sutcliffe's.

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On her second visit, Mrs Komeda sorts out the arrangements at the hospital to have a second, narrower bed placed in the private ward. She notices the ring and smiles, but does not say a word about it.

"You must sleep sometime," she says gently. Her usual brazen manner is tamped down when she drops in; oddly enough, she is a restful visitor. Will likes that; she doesn't make much small talk, only brings him simple light meals made by her cook. She shares photos of her and her new lover, a hunky forty-two-year-old investment banker from Philadelphia, and talks quietly and enthusiastically of the Caribbean where she is intending to go once winter sets in in Baltimore.

Will imagines Hannibal on a tropical island and finds himself pleased by the idea. He tells Hannibal about it, of the doctor in a loose white shirt and khaki slacks, of them swimming in dazzlingly blue waters, of making love while the scent and sounds of the sea wafts in through large windows.

He doesn't tell Hannibal that it has been a week since the accident.

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Mr Curtis and the rest of Will's colleagues come by on the Sunday, and Will almost breaks when they envelop him in a hug. Thankfully, Mr Curtis only claps him on the shoulder. It makes it much easier for Will to hand in his resignation, and his employer only tells him not to be a stranger. He also promises to help restring the harpsichord, "once Dr Lecter is better".

Will promises to visit them with Hannibal when he's well.

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Unlike what everyone assumes, Will is taking care of himself. He goes home twice a day to feed and walk the dogs, both of whom are anxious and confused about why Hannibal isn't there to spoil them with treats. He showers and keeps his stubble groomed. He eats proper meals - organic takeaways from a cafe two blocks away from the hospital.

The remaining hours he stays with Hannibal. He sleeps in the narrow, uncomfortable bed. His laptop is there, playing his and Hannibal's favorite pieces softly.

It isn't as though he's not making full use of his time. With one hand clasping Hannibal's, Will studies for the SATs. Sometimes, when Beverly is able to visit, she quizzes him through the math portion. Alana helps with the writing portion. He researches course requirements. He even had a conversation with the dean over the phone - Mr Curtis' thoughtful arrangement - and Will is pretty certain he can enroll next fall.

Other than studying, Will composes. Sheet after sheet after sheet of paper is filled with musical notations. He builds minuets out of the way Hannibal moves in the kitchen, études from their conversations, bagatelles from their walks together with the dogs, rhapsodies from Hannibal's art, and sonatas from their lovemaking. The music fills his head to drown out the mechanical beeps and hums of the electronic monitoring equipment. Will has no idea how good or bad his composing is, but he hoards all of the pieces jealously, unwilling to let anyone know of them before Hannibal does.

It's been two weeks. To Will, the days feel like a whispered breeze against his cheek, and the grind of forever on his heart.

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The hospital is quiet at this time of the evening. It smells of old air and weariness; a few gray-faced visitors trundle into the chilly air, bundled in thick coats.

Matthew walks Mikolaj and Selina to the main entrance since he's heading home as well. He gives Mikolaj a brief hug and a slap on his back. "You take care now."

"You too, man," says Mikolaj. He slings an arm around Selina's shoulders. "Sorry I couldn't stay in town any longer. Dad's nearly apoplectic I'm shoving aside my responsibilities for a friend."

"He's not gonna be mad about the whole mortgage thing, I hope? Because I will pay that back somehow."

"Hey, Matt, shut the fuck up about that, okay? It was a good deed, I liked doing it, and I trust you'll take care of the property." Mikolaj's grin brightens. "And maybe you'll have someone staying with you by then too."

Matthew shakes his head. "Nah, it's too early to think about that."

The cold breeze that sweeps around them cocoons them in a small bubble of introspection and thought. The two guys both know that they are missing a third, and Will's absence feels jarringly painful.

Selina, possibly sensing the guys' mood, fishes keys out of her boyfriend's coat pocket. "I'll get the car. Give my love to Will when you see him next, Matthew. It's been nice meeting you guys. I only wish we're going on a better note."

This should be the time we are teasing him about his proposing to Dr Lecter, Matthew thinks sadly, *not worrying about whether there's been any changes to Dr Lecter's condition.*

"Keep me in the loop about Will, 'kay?" says Mikolaj quietly. There is genuine concern in his eyes. "Call me if anything, well, happens. I'll come back on the first flight out, I swear."

"I know," says Matthew, as somber as Mikolaj. He jams his hands in his pockets. "Dr Lecter will be fine."

Mikolaj raises an eyebrow, but his tone is soft and wistful. "It's been two weeks, Matt. I'm not sure how long we can keep believing that."

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On his way to home, Matthew mulls over Mikolaj's words. He has to remain positive, but he's starting to lose faith too. At the moment Will is still holding strong to his belief that Dr Lecter will recover fully. Matthew dreads the day his best friend loses even that sliver of hope.

As he drives, he listens to the radio, and they are still harping on and on about Chilton and the Chesapeake Ripper. The current theory is that Chilton was so humiliated about not being a good surgeon in medical school that he turned to practicing on cadavers, and eventually decided to show up his peers.

Reporters are still camped outside his house, as they have been for the past two weeks, though the herd is thinning. He can't wait for them to be gone completely.

The first morning after the whole mess, Matthew was trapped inside; the moment he opened the door, he was faced with a wall of cameras and microphones. Eventually he had called Dr Freyman to explain the situation, and also Agent Starling. She managed to get three police officers to come by and shoo the journalists away from his door so he could get to work. Even there, the reporters swarmed. Everyone and their mother wanted to know why Chilton had gone to his place.

Matthew has heard some weird guesses. Some said Matthew was a friend, some claimed Matthew had found out about Chilton, and quite a few even assumed that they were secret lovers. Matthew responded to nothing, as advised by the FBI.

Delia had teased Matthew over that in a text. He's glad she hasn't been put off, although he promised to wait till the newshounds have backed off before he goes over to the Skin Canvas for their tattooing session. She's trying to talk him into getting Ursa Major and Ursa Minor on his pecs, and place Aquilas on his shoulders. He's already been won over by the designs she emailed, but it's nice having someone to text with that isn't badgering him about the Ripper.

He feels a little guilty about that. Part of him thinks he should still be grieving for Esther, that he should be eaten up with worry over Dr Lecter and Will, yet he can't help enjoying this brief respite from the melodramatic turns his life has taken recently. He relishes the *normalcy* that Delia represents. Just a guy and a girl texting each other. Matthew hasn't told Will about it though. In a way, he loves having something that's *his* after this whirlwind season of the death and mayhem that is Will and Dr Lecter's romance.

It must be the late hour and the lack of restorative sleep. Matthew is seldom this maudlin. After some consideration of his schedule the next day, Matthew grabs a can of beer and sits down at his laptop to research house repair. If he's going to make a life here, then hell if he's going to live with dried bloodstains on the steps of the front door.

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"They can't do that," says Beverly for perhaps the third time. Her fingers dig into her maroon pants. "Jack, they can't. Can they?"

"They can," says Jack. He looks placid, his demeanor almost eerily steady. Like bedrock. "Not that I'm going to let them."

"But- They're not gonna fire you, are they?"

"They can't fire me if I take a leave of absence. The vultures will disperse eventually; new targets will appear."

Brian Zeller covers his mouth and then exhales heavily. "So.. what are you gonna do, Jack?"

"Rest. Go to Italy, spend some time there alone. Walk along the quays, perhaps. I've missed the country." There is a wistfulness in his tone that tells the three other agents not to pry further. "Ever since... I have chased the Ripper for well over ten years. Given my life over to death. This hunt for the Ripper... It took too much away. Lives, lost, because of a pathetic little narcissist who had to prove he was better."

Jimmy folds his arms. "You're not going to just disappear, right? Find a home in Florida and have a dozen dogs or something?"

"Hell no," says Jack with a short bark of laughter. It eases the tension in the room subtly, in a way that only serves to highlight that there was tension in the first place. "No, I'm going to take a three-month vacation, and when I return, I'll be going into a classroom."

"Become a guru to the freshies?" says Zeller.

"Who will run BAU then?" asks Jimmy.

"Kade Purnell."

"I don't like her," says Jimmy immediately. Off their looks, he shrugs. "She's too fussy about rules and way too uptight in the morgue. I don't think she's used to the smell of dead bodies."

Zeller gives him a Look. "That isn't actually a bad thing, Jim."

Beverly frowns. She hasn't heard good things about the woman, even if Purnell is fairly competent. She holds her tongue, however. Given her capabilities, she can request a transfer to any unit at any time. If she and Purnell can't work together, there are at least half a dozen that wants her.

"Whatever the case," says Jack, leaning back in his chair, his bulky frame already less tense than it usually appears, "I wish all of you the best. She's going to need the best, and I'm sure you can help her transition into her role easily. Now that the Chesapeake Ripper's caught, I may finally get a proper night's sleep."

"The One that Almost Got Away," Zeller reads out from his cell phone. "The new guys at Tattle-Crime aren't as good at incendiary journalism, are they?"

Jack shakes his head. "No. But they don't get on my nerves as much as Lounds did." He pauses, and says, "She was supposed to have been the last, I think."

While her colleagues discuss possible theories on why the Ripper emerged from his retirement, Beverly crosses her legs and blows out her cheeks. The air-conditioning is out of whack - it feels way too cold in here. She supposes it may be a psychological response to the idea of Jack vacating this office, with its perpetually open doors and functional furniture, with wood-framed pictures of Mrs Crawford still adorning the desk and two of the shelves.

"Maybe Miriam found him, and he decided to go out with a bang? He would assume that she had gone to him with proof," says Zeller.

Jimmy cocks his head. "And he took her eyes because she had seen him?"

"All our guesses won't ever be verified," Beverly says. She suddenly yearns for Alana's warmth, to see her fiancee smile in that welcoming manner of hers. "Let's not talk shop for a minute. Jack, you're not gonna leave so soon, right? Because you totally deserve a party."

Jack allows a broad smile. "I won't feel right with a party, Beverly. Not when one of my friends is still in the hospital."

"He'll wake," says Beverly with firm conviction.

Zeller looks at her pityingly. "Bev, it's been more than two weeks-"

"He will wake," Beverly repeats, her stare hard as diamonds. "He will wake, because Will needs him to."

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He feels tired in a way he has not in decades. Bone-tired, heart-tired.

Nevertheless, Hannibal ascends the stairs which seemingly has no end. The darkness tears at him, scratching and ripping into his skin and flesh like thousands of scalpels. He's drenched now, practically soaking in his own blood, and in the dark he looks painted in ink. Still he perseveres.

Sometimes he hears snatches of unfamiliar melodies in Will's voice. They remind him not to stop. Yet, when every step seem to burden him with more agony instead of light, Hannibal finds his resolve sorely tested.

After all, Mischa and Esther are below. They are there, and he can find a modicum of peace with them. In time he may even forget why he ever wanted to go. He knows that he need only turn back, go through the doors and hallways again, go back to the kitchen...

But he will never find an exit again if he returns. This he also knows, like he knows his own monstrously human nature.

He must not turn back.

He is Orpheus now, but his Eurydice is before him, not behind.

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Alana has just got to the ward after a fairly short day at the university, and is sharing her lecture on offender profiling with Will. The young man is curious and asks pertinent questions, some of which Alana wishes her students have thought of. She even passes him a set of her lecture notes, and chivies him to shave off the stubble.

In another life, she reflects, Will might have been an excellent criminologist. He's always been able to do that, look at a person and *feel* what they feel. The keen emotional insight Will built out of defense against his father's moods has helped him grow into a loving, understanding person, and so far the only one truly capable of lowering Hannibal's walls.

In the past she hadn't been able to see it. Now, with the benefit of objectivity and hindsight, she sees how lonely her mentor must have been, even with all his acquaintances and the scant handful of people allowed to know him more personally. Alana considers herself Hannibal's friend, but she doesn't possess the sensitivity of an artist - and an artist is what Hannibal truly is. Will's perceptiveness coupled with his extraordinary empathy makes him the perfect complement to Hannibal.

She swallows against the lump in her throat, feeling unexpectedly emotional.

Before he met Will, Hannibal might have already given up hope of ever meeting someone who understood him. Not as a patron nor as a benefactor, not as an admirer (Alana smiles wryly at this) nor as a student. A fellow artist, someone whose very soul yearned to create and express beauty.

And along came Will Graham, twenty-four years his junior. If at first the romance seemed ludicrous, over time it has become apparent that the two are well-matched, and after these weeks Alana's doubts have all been washed away.

Alana has caught a glimpse of the music Will has been writing madly in his vigil, and even if her musical knowledge is barely more than a smidgen (enough for her to play Chopsticks and no more), she can tell that Will is Hannibal's equal.

She reaches over to the bed and pats Hannibal's uninjured knee. "You owe him a proposal, Hannibal. You're not going to hurt him by dying like this, right?"

When he emerges, Will asks after the case on Chilton, but Alana has no answers. She is under the microscope at the moment, since she was one of those who recommended Chilton to the FBI. The other is lying in the hospital bed, comatose.

"It's a different team reviewing the cases," she allows him that much as she hands him a new novel from Neil Gaiman. "Bev thinks they're amateur but dogged. I'm not sure if that's a compliment."

"Coming from her..." Will smiles slightly, his eyes falling to the page in front of him. His cheeks are thin and there is an unhealthy cast to his complexion. Alana supposes that's due to Will not getting enough sleep. The young man closes the book and says, "I'd love to see her soon though, she's been here only four times-"

They both hear the change in the sound of the monitoring devices at the same time. Will forgets the rest of his sentence and drops the book, leaping up to sit right on the edge of the bed. As always, he takes up Hannibal's right hand, the one with the ring, and clasps it tightly. His voice shakes, just a little, when he murmurs, "Hannibal? Mon cœur, je suis ici, s'il vous plaît ouvrir vos yeux." He continues to whisper in French, just holding and kissing the limp right hand and staring avidly at his lover's emotionless face.

It stuns Alana how touching she finds Will speaking French to Hannibal. She is fluent in the language, her mother being French-Canadian, and while his pronunciation is still a little flat, there is no denying that he has put in long and arduous hours of work to be able to express his thoughts so fluidly.

Will's eyes suddenly widen. One of his hands clapped over his mouth and he inhales sharply.

"What is it?" Alana asks.

The machine's beeping speeds up.

"I felt- His hand, his hand twitched," Will whispers, face alight with joy. "Alana, Alana he's waking up. He's waking up."

True enough, Hannibal's nostrils start twitching, and Alana can see the movement of his eyes beneath the closed lids. She finds herself clutching Will's shoulder, tears running down her face, and pulls away.

Will brushes hair from Hannibal's brow. He murmurs again, much more softly, and the smile on his face is beatific. He looks like a Renaissance painting brought to life.

Alana feels like she has intruded on a sacred moment. Medical personnel should be arriving any time now, but irrationally she wants the two of them to have this moment, preserved for eternity in amber. Her entire frame clenches with the need to reassure herself that this is happening, that her friend and mentor is waking up, that Will Graham isn't going to be alone and no one has to find out how much pain a young man has to endure-

The machines suddenly kick into high gear, emitting a piercing shriek.

"Wha- Hannibal? Hannibal don't scare me, Hannibal-" Will is loath to leave his lover. "Hannibal!"

"Mr Graham, you have to move aside, let us help him," says the doctor, a calm and assertive woman who pushes Will into Alana's hands. Alana thinks her name is Dr Foster. "Miss Bloom, if you could?"

"Of course," she says. Dragging Will away is harder than she expected, and they compromised by staying out of the way in the corner of the ward.

"Alana what's happening? Why- I felt his hand move, I swear I did, what's going on?" Will asked, craning around, desperate to catch a glimpse of whatever is going on with his lover.

The machines suddenly quieten down and resume their steady pulse. Dr Foster glances over. "Come here, Mr Graham. You're wanted."

*****

Will rushes over. He can't really hear over the thundering of his pulse in his ears, but when he gets to the bed, Hannibal's eyes are straining to stay open. The older man's gaze falls on Will and in that moment, Will calms down.

He takes Hannibal's right hand and squeezes lightly. "Don't worry. I'm here."

Hannibal's dry lips move almost imperceptibly. Someone passes Will a glass of water and tells him to dab water on Hannibal's lips with his fingers, so he quickly does that, and then puts the water away. Blinking with great effort, Hannibal attempts to speak again. Will leans down to listen.

His lover is speaking in barely more than a breath: "*Found you.*"

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Yep, I rushed to complete this for Valentine's Day cos I'm sappy :D
Thank you so much for coming with me on this journey. It would not have been possible without your love and support and encouragement from your kudos and comments.
Please let me know what you think of this series!
I'm on twitter and tumblr too, so you can give your comments directly :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With Matthew properly braced against the headboard, Will snuggles closer and tucks his head under Matthew's chin. "I can't believe this is happening."

Resigned once again to being a full-body cushion, Matthew pets the dark brown curls affectionately. "It is happening though."

"Mmm." The younger man peers up coyly from beneath his lashes. "Can I stay here and not go outside? I mean, we're all comfy here..."

Outside is a perfect spring day, and even from the bed Matthew can see that the skies are impossibly blue. He sighs and runs his fingers through Will's hair, enjoying the weight of the other young man on his own body. They are comfortable and warm right now, and Matthew is tempted to tell Will that they can stay there forever. Before he formulates a response, however, the door opens and Delia strides in.

"All right, Graham, your half hour is up." She smiles crookedly. Her hair is a bright blond-and-lime-green mix today and it matches incongruously with her lilac dress. "Stop groping my date."

"Noooo..." Will groans and burrows his face into Matthew's neck. Then he peeks up, pouting and beseeching. "Make her go away? Please?"

Matthew looks from Will to Delia. "Um-"

"Oh no you don't," Dee declares, joining the two on the bed and ruffling Will's hair further. "I know your trick with the big blue puppy eyes. Get off my boyfriend - you need to smarten up. You have, what, twenty minutes before you have to show your pretty face?"

Will pouts even more, but this is evidently for show. "I'm supposed to be the reassured party here."

"Yes, and you have been thoroughly petted and reassured for the past thirty minutes." Delia lugs Will off of Matthew and then proceeds to brush down his wayward curls. She folds

down his collar and clucks at him for the state of his shirt. "Still anxious?"

Will wrinkles his nose. "If I say yes, can I cuddle longer with Mattie?"

"No."

"You're lucky I like you," Will declares, obediently tilting his chin up for Dee to straighten his tie.

Delia snorts. "*You're* lucky I'm not weirded out by your clinginess to my boyfriend."

From the safety of the bed Matthew hugs a pillow and watches Delia and Will pretend to grouse at each other. For some reason, they get along like a house on fire. It's a dynamic that the nurse has yet to figure out, but between Will and Delia, Matthew is well and truly taken care of - in all senses of the word.

Delia steps back and nods. "You look decent now. Okay, get out. My time with my boyfriend now."

"Come on, there's still time-"

"Out!"

Matthew cranes his neck just enough to see Dee shut the door on Will. He sighs and shakes his head. "You're possibly the only one who can get away with bossing him around."

"And I'm using that fact to my advantage," says Delia, climbing back onto the bed. She crawls over to Matthew. "So we have just over twenty minutes to ourselves and I think I know how to spend it."

"Mmm... I do have to be with Will - mm - before the ceremony begins-"

Without warning she slides a hand over Matthew's crotch and grins cheekily. "I *knew* it. You do get a stiffy every time he cuddles with you."

Embarrassed, Matthew pulls his girlfriend in for a kiss. "It's kind of hard not to, the way he squirms."

"Mmm." Delia wiggles out of her underwear and unzips Matthew efficiently, and fishes out a condom from her dress pocket. "I'm not complaining."

*****

Beverly lets out a low whistle when she sees Alana. "Babe! I am so thankful Matthew has a girlfriend or I might just fight him for the honor. You look *gorgeous.* Give us a twirl now."

Blushing, Alana turns around on the spot. The yellow strapless dress flares out, its lacy hem fluttering delicately. The strong sunny yellow is complemented by lovely cornflower blue accessories; the most extravagant of these is the crystal brooch at the waist, which Alana has

had customized in blue and white Swarovski crystals. Only the ruby ring on her finger clashes with the color scheme.

"I lucked out," Beverly proclaims proudly, planting a kiss on Alana's cheek. "Man, I can't wait for our wedding day. You're gonna make all the straight men and gay women drool and I can rub it in their faces that you're mine."

"Stop that," says Alana, blushing even more deeply now. "Have you seen Will?"

"Last I checked he was still with Matthew, calming his nerves."

The two women stroll down to the venue and Alana pauses. She is going to wait for Matthew Brown there. "Is everyone here already?"

"Yes, Lanie, everyone is here, they're mingling and drinking. The officiant and the caterers and the string quartet and the jazz singer that was supposed to perform for Hannibal's proposal are also here. Calm down, sweetie, it's all going to plan."

Alana exhales in one long breath. "I mean, Hannibal didn't get to propose so... I just want today to be perfect for him."

"Remember how he grumbled about Will proposing while he was in a coma?"

"And all my hard work planning that was wasted, yes," says Alana in a low, amused voice. She kisses Beverly softly, and they linger over the kiss. "Still, I'm glad he woke up with hardly any loss to his memory."

Beverly's lips twitch wryly. "Apparently he forgot huge tracts of architectural information and his memory palace now has blank patches. Will was commenting about that last night."

"That and a mild hand tremor. Hannibal got off lightly." The two women kiss again, before Alana firmly pushes Beverly to find herself a seat. "Go on. Usher everyone to their places, dear, I'm going over to Hannibal."

She finds her mentor talking with the venue manager. After nearly four months of therapy, he is back to nearly a hundred percent, and for that she is very glad.

The first words he spoke when he woke up was to Will - and the young man has hoarded those to himself greedily - but for the few weeks following that he had been painfully reliant on Will for nearly everything. The devotion Will showed is nothing short of inspiring. Between Will and their friends, Hannibal has recovered his memories and autonomy.

The last two months have been hectic with preparations for the wedding. Alana doesn't *want* to think of the term 'bridezilla', but with Hannibal's attention to detail and Will's zealous determination to make the day perfect, they have driven two planners to quit the contract and this current third one swearing that he'll change track to something more calming, like becoming a stockbroker or an air traffic controller.

"Alana," says Hannibal with a pleasant smile, his handsome face now slightly marred by the vicious scar on the left side of his face. "Is everything going well?"

"Yes it is, and you look splendid," says Alana. She brushes a fleck of lint from Hannibal's deep blue jacket and adjusts the calla lily boutonniere. "I am so happy for you two."

"It's not something you'd have expected to say in the past," Hannibal teases. He massages his left hand absentmindedly; stress sets it off. Despite his facade of calm, Hannibal is as nervous as any other groom.

*****

Will is so nervous, he is practically vibrating out of his *skin*. When Matthew finds him in an anteroom, he is pacing around, clenching and relaxing his hands, and trying not to just run out, grab Hannibal, and elope to France.

"I know what you are thinking, and no, you are not going to fly off to Europe without first marrying him in a proper ceremony which you have so painstakingly put together," says Matthew, coming over to his best friend to hold him in a firm embrace. "Come here."

"Mattie, what am I gonna do?" Shuddering, Will curls into Matthew, pressing his face into his friend's neck. "I really want to marry him but everyone's going to be staring and I'm going to forget my vows and I'm going to make a fool of myself and he'll be so embarrassed by me he'll hate me forever I'm going to have to hide in the hills and be a crazy dog guy-"

"Hush, shhh. Hush. Breathe," Matthew orders, his voice low. Gently rocking Will in his arms, he says, "You've nursed him through his recovery and you think he'll be embarrassed if you forget a few words? Will, you know he loves you, and you love him. Nothing else matters."

Will lets Matthew hug him for a bit longer. The physical act has become an act of comfort between them, to ease Will's strain of caring for Hannibal in the initial weeks after leaving the hospital. Matthew adamantly refuses to call that cuddling.

Delia says it's strange but sweet to see them so close to each other. In an odd way, it helps Matthew to work through his grief. Will needs him to be his emotional ballast and shelter, just as Esther had, and this gives Matthew a reason to change and adapt. Will's need gives Matthew purpose. He's glad that Will has cast him as an older brother - even if their "not-cuddling" sometimes leave him with an inappropriate physical reminder of his lingering attraction to Will Graham.

The younger man pulls away and exhales. "Okay. Okay, I think I'm ready."

"Yes you are," says Matthew. He pats his pocket. "And I have the rings."

"Okay. Okay, this is it." Will turns faintly green. "Oh my god I'm getting married. I'm actually getting married."

On impulse, Matthew presses a kiss to Will's forehead. "Yes you are, and I couldn't be happier for you."

Will blinks rapidly, and grins at his best friend. "You'll always be here for me, right?"

"I'm resigned to my fate as your human pillow." Matthew's tone softens. "I love you, both of you, and whatever else may happen in the future, I'm really, really happy about today. She would've been delighted too."

The younger man's smile trembles. "I wish she was here."

"Me too." Matthew swallows the lump in his throat and flicks a tendril from Will's brow. As though that is the cue, Dr Bloom strides in, looking stunning in her yellow dress. She beams at them, unaware of the poignant exchange just moments ago.

"Will, you look wonderful," she exclaims, and hugs him quickly.

Matthew has to agree. Will is wearing a blue suit with black lapels, the blue lighter than Matthew's own navy. Will's boutonniere is crooked and Matthew adjusts it, before offering his arm to Dr Bloom.

She takes the arm and grins. "Here we go."

*****

Hannibal is already waiting in the other anteroom. He gazes fondly at the floral arch with its elegant calla lilies and roses framing the scene and scents the air delicately, wanting to preserve every detail of this day. The officiant, a plump, matronly Mdm Parks who has a very white smile, perks up on hearing the string quartet begin to play.

"That's them," she says unnecessarily as Matthew and Alana proceed down the aisle to the bower. "And that's my cue." She goes next, and grins brightly at the assembled guests.

There aren't many, out of deference to Will's wishes. There were Mr Curtis and his wife, Will's former co-workers, the agents of the BAU - Jack looks rested after his vacation - with Beverly taking charge of the ushers, Mrs Komeda, Mikolaj and his girlfriend, Matthew's girlfriend, and a handful of Hannibal's regular dinner companions.

Hannibal smooths down the front of his suit, and takes the plain ebony cane in his left hand.

*****

Will's heart leaps into his mouth when he sees Hannibal for the first time in a week. Beverly had made them separate, insisted that it would make the day more special "if you haven't shagged the few nights before the big day", and while he disagreed with her initially, Will thinks there's some logic to her madness. Hannibal looks debonair in an old-world way, like he's from a different era entirely, and he looks so *beautiful* that Will wants to worship him.

Hannibal's expression warms as they gaze at each other across the court, and then they are standing together at the end of the aisle, and the older man has offered his right arm for Will to hold, and *they are standing at the front with the officiant how-*

"Breathe," Matthew murmurs just loudly enough for Hannibal and the officiant to overhear.

Will breathes.

Mdm Parks smiles in a motherly fashion. "I shan't take too long."

She goes on to talk about the sanctity of marriage or something of that sort. What she *actually* says goes by in a hazy blur for Will. For the moment, there is no one else in the world for Will. Hannibal's hands are warm, if just a little less firm than they used to be, and achingly familiar; Will thinks he could drown in those burgundy eyes, rich and glimmering with emotion. Their fingers squeeze together lightly.

Mdm Parks finishes her remarks and looks at each of them. "We are all honored to be here to witness and affirm the choice you make to stand together as lifemates and partners. Do you, Hannibal Lecter, take Will Graham to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

"I do," says Hannibal, his voice low but clear.

Someone behind Will sniffs. He thinks it may be Mrs Komeda, or maybe Beverly. (Later he finds out that it is Jack Crawford, and is oddly touched by the man's sentiment.)

"Do you, Will Graham, take Hannibal Lecter to be your lawfully wedded husband?" asks the officiant.

Never has two words felt more clumsy on his tongue. Will swallows and declares, "I do."

There's a cheer from the guests. Will ignores them; the joy suffusing Hannibal's face enraptures him. Then he remembers that it's time for the vows. The two face each other, Hannibal handing the cane to Alana, and hold hands.

"My darling Will," Hannibal says, quiet and sincere, "in my life, all that I have worked for, hoped for, none compares to you. You are everything to me. From the moment you gave me the moon, I have wanted to give you the world. I promise that I will do everything in my power to love you, cherish you, and honor you as my husband, whatever challenges may come. This ring is a reminder to us both of my promise."

Will has to hold his breath, because he thinks he may begin crying, and he still has his own vows to make. His pulse races as he watches Hannibal slide the ring onto his finger - a simple gold ring with its square diamond glittering in the late afternoon sunlight. The flash of triumphant possessiveness in Hannibal's eyes teases the darkness inside Will. The unmarred right side of the face and the scarred left are equally entranced and entrancing; both the man and the monster now own Will Graham, and it was *thrilling*.

It is Will's turn. For a horrifying second he can't remember what he's supposed to say, but Hannibal squeezes his fingers, and Will takes a deep breath. If he can't recall the words, he will speak from the heart.

"Hannibal," he begins, and his voice shakes. He clears his throat. "Hannibal, I... I love you. I love you so much that... I, um." He chuckles and confesses, "I-I can't remember what I wrote for the vows, so I'm improvising."

There is a soft ripple of laughter. Hannibal brushes his knuckles over Will's cheek, his gaze infinitely gentle.

Will takes a deep breath. "There has never been, and will never be, anyone else for me but you. We have been through some difficult times, but we have always weathered them together, and I want... I will gladly and, and joyfully spend my life with you. You will be the first person I see in the morning and the last I see before I sleep. I promise that I will love you, cherish you, and honor you as-as my husband, for all the days of our lives. This ring..." His voice cracks, and he smiles bashfully at the older man. "Years ago, I gave you the moon, and now, today, with this ring, I give you my forever and my everything.

The ring slips on to Hannibal's finger perfectly and Will lets his touch linger over the simple band of metal. So small, yet so binding. His throat constricts. He thinks he will write a nocturne around the vows, and play it for Hannibal at their first wedding anniversary. He's still composing and editing his compositions from when Hannibal was in the hospital; he's going to play his favorite piece on their honeymoon as a special gift.

The officiant clasps her hands together with satisfaction. "Well now, I pronounce you husband and husband. You may now kiss."

Will steps closer to his *husband* - such a wonderful word! - and tilts his face up slightly. Hannibal kisses him, chaste but firm, their breaths dusting over each other's cheeks. Will thinks his heart may burst with joy and love, and clutches on to his *husband* with trembling hands. When they part, the tops of Hannibal's cheeks are pink and his eyes are glistening faintly. The guests are possibly clapping, or cheering, or shouting - Will pays them no heed.

"I love you," the doctor murmurs.

Will can only repeat the sentiment, his mind made stupid with sheer adoration.

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Will takes the champagne from Mikolaj and eyes it warily. "This isn't drugged, right?"

Mikolaj pretends to scowl. "You're never going to let that incident go, are you?"

"Nope." Will sips from the flute and smiles broadly. His cheeks are aching from all the grinning, but he can't stop. Everything is perfect: the weather has held, the music is exquisite, and the flowers look divine. Everyone appears to be enjoying the food. Hannibal put together the menu personally and insisted that the chefs follow his recipes and plating to the letter, and the result is a decadent feast created with the theme of love.

Selina is off to the side talking to Delia and Matthew, while Hannibal is chatting to Jack. Will catches himself staring at his husband - he's never going to get sick of the dizzy glee at the word, he thinks - and blushes when Mikolaj asks dryly, "So who's topping tonight?"

"That," says Will with as much hauteur as he can manage in his blissful mood, "is none of your business, Miko."

"Ah, so he is."

"You don't know that!"

Mikolaj leans over and whispers, "I do know how often you've stared at his crotch today."

Will blushes dark red. "I did not!" he protests weakly.

Laughing, Mikolaj clinks his glass with Will's. "Have fun on your honeymoon, Will. I am so happy for you."

*****

"Congratulations," Mrs Komeda coos at the happy couple while the tables and chairs are cleared for dancing. "Your vows were so beautiful, I almost feel like remarrying. Wherever are you going for your honeymoon, darlings?"

"We're touring the south of France," says Hannibal, casting a fond look at his husband. It is a strange thing, to be this affected by a banal word, but Will Graham's new status makes Hannibal's heart flutter. "We have two months before we have to return, and he has to get ready for music college."

Mrs Komeda smiles indulgently. "I'm looking forward to recitals, Will, you've not performed for such a long time."

Will ducks his head and averts his eyes shyly. "I don't know if I'm good enough to perform, but if I do, you are definitely a guest of honor."

"Oh now," she trills, "that will be fabulous. Hannibal, I'll be waiting for a proper dinner party once you return from France. We have missed you and your culinary miracles."

"I'll set one up before he starts the semester," says the psychiatrist.

The singer takes the stage, and then a hush falls over the crowd as they notice the band setting up. "Dear friends, I was supposed to have sung this a few months back, but an unfortunate accident delayed its performance. This is a song for our newlyweds, one that Dr Lecter has dedicated to Will. Please welcome the Graham-Lecters for their first dance as spouses."

Mrs Komeda gracefully steps away with Hannibal's cane, leaving the couple alone. Hannibal kisses Will on his temple. "Take my lead?"

"I'll follow wherever you go," says Will.

Hannibal is only slightly unsteady on his left leg, but this isn't a challenging dance. They lock gazes on each other as the band starts, and the singer launches into a cover of Etta James's *At Last.* They sway together, Will pressing close to Hannibal, breathing in the man's exquisite cologne. The song ends too soon, but it is all right; they don't let go of each other, and continue dancing to the next song, and the next, and the next.

Will can't help relishing the sensation of the skin-warmed metal on Hannibal's finger. He recalls the inscription - *mort et la vie* - in Hannibal's ring, and the same one in his own.

Death and life. We are both for each other.

Overhead, the earliest stars are just becoming visible, and the guests are dancing too. Alana and Beverly look radiant, the former in her yellow dress and the agent in a deep purple bare-backed dress; Mikolaj and Selina in the corner; Matthew and Dee are just stepping onto the dance floor, Delia winking teasingly at Will when she sees him looking. She likes it when he gets Matthew aroused, for some reason. He can't figure her out fully yet, but they respect each other's roles in Matthew's life, and that makes it easy for him to like her.

Satisfied that their friends are enjoying themselves, Will leans back slightly and studies Hannibal's face. The fine lines around the psychiatrist's eyes, the silvering of his fine blond hair, and the raised, stretched line that slices across his husband's sculpted features: Will takes it all in, and then kisses Hannibal on his sensual mouth, slow and deep and passionate.

When they part, Hannibal's eyes are hooded with desire. Will runs his thumbs over the impossible cheekbones, and then once more along the scar. Maybe Hannibal will have plastic surgery to remove it. Maybe not. It doesn't matter; the older man is alive, and they are married, and they are here together.

"To think I almost lost you," Will whispers.

"And I almost couldn't find you." Hannibal's voice wavers and his lovely maroon eyes glisten, as though he is holding back an excess of emotion. "You chose to stay when you could so easily have left."

"That's because my choice is you." Will touches his forehead to Hannibal's. "My choice will always be you."

Chapter End Notes

the entrance music
Wedding venue is Chase Court, a truly stunning place from what I can see in photos
Hannibal's and Will's suits, with ties that are the shade of Will's eyes
And both wear calla lilies for boutonnieres
Their wedding bands
the cover of At Last I used as reference

End Notes

The events of this story take place about three-four years after those in *Bread & Music*.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!